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# Strange Way Home

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## Recommended Citation

Mukhi, Seema Raju, "Strange Way Home" (2006). *Theses*. 135.  
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**Strange Way Home**

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M.A., English, Teaching of Writing Specialization, Southern Illinois University, 2004

A.B., English and Education, Washington University in St. Louis, 2002

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in English with an Emphasis in Fiction

**Preliminary Copy**

**November 2006**

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**Chapter 1: Knowledge for our Girls**

A white woman walked into our hot, cramped classroom and stopped at the podium. Unlike the nuns who taught the other classes, this woman didn't wear a dirty pink sari and pull her hair back into a bun; she wore a long skirt, and left her brown hair loose, as if she were going out at night for dinner. She carried a big, leather shoulder bag, which stood upright when she set it on the floor. From where I was seated—halfway back in the classroom—she looked as tall as a man.

No one whispered or passed notes. The coconut palms rustled outside, and a few monkeys shrieked. Girls shifted in their chairs, pulled out textbooks from their totes, poised their ink pens over their notebooks.

“Hello.” The woman was American, it seemed.

“Hello, Ma'am,” said one hundred and forty female voices in unison.

The woman stood straight. “I'm Mrs. Whitney, your English teacher.”

We waited.

“Have you all bought the textbook?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” we shouted together. This was an odd beginning. Of course we all had the textbook.

“I've looked at it, and there's no reason you need to be studying abridged children's versions of these stories and books.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“Don't worry. We'll cover the whole PUC curriculum, but we'll be doing a bit more in here.”

A disappointed rumbling. “Yes, Ma'am.”

She grabbed a piece of her hair and pushed it behind her shoulder, irritated.

“There’s no need to keep saying ‘Yes, Ma’am’ after everything I say.”

None of us knew how to respond to such a command, other than with, “Yes, Ma’am.” We all shifted around again, listening to her tell us about the study of literature.

All day the image of this woman, Mrs. Whitney, shook me awake during my classes and kept me from learning about the Indian commerce system and double-column accounting. I couldn’t concentrate on radians, or cosine-anything. I wondered why she told us not to say “Yes, Ma’am”, why she was teaching in India, whether all American women were so impossibly tall. I thought about her accent, those American R’s gliding in such a way—I couldn’t make my mouth imitate the sound if I tried.

When I went home, I looked at the English textbook’s cracked, cheap binding. Inside were abridged Shakespeare plays and Dickens novels—we had read many of these two-page summaries over the years. What would it be like to read the real thing?

I skipped math class the next day and went to the library to find these books. I just wanted to see them, I think, to see how thick they were and what kinds of words were inside. I had never been in the college’s library before—I had only just started in 11<sup>th</sup> standard, so the buildings were new to me—but it was much like I expected. A few flimsy metal shelves held science books, old physics textbooks, a few calculus books, a handful of accounting books, a little bit of commerce and economics. I found a book from 1980—over fifteen years ago—on computers. The tiny room’s ceiling plaster sagged, and a film of dust covered everything. Two folding tables and a few folding chairs sat empty at the side of the room, and there was a checkout desk in the corner.

I went to the desk. The nun must have been eighty, at least, her hair yellowed by repeated henna dying and her standard-issue pink sari settled into the hollow in her shoulder formed by decades of thick elastic bra straps.

“Yes,” she said.

“I want to find something that Shakespeare wrote.”

“We don’t have any of those.”

“How about Dickens? Do you have *Great Expectations*?” I asked, remembering the summary we read in 10<sup>th</sup> standard.

“No.”

“How about something by Jane Austen?” I had read two years before the summary of *Pride and Prejudice*, a love story where two people didn’t like each other at first but fell in love eventually.

“No.”

I got bored with looking at the shelves and walked out to the basketball field with the oversized concrete steps along the sides. No one was playing, and the dust from the ground had settled. I bought a Pepsi from the soda fountain and watched the other girls walk by. One girl wore a mustard-yellow *salwar kurti* with a hot pink *dupatta*; another donned jeans so tight I could see the lines of her underwear. There were girls in every tasteless form of fashion, tank tops too tight, *kurtas* hanging down like gunny sacks, hair greased with coconut oil and tied back tightly in braids, glasses too big, hairclips with gold bows, ill-fitting jeans, cheap sandals, brocade shirts.

It seemed that a girl could dress however she liked here, as long as she met the dress code of covering her knees—no one here would even notice! I felt proud that my

mama had taught me how to dress properly, that I came from a tasteful family with good style and good manners. But I wondered, too, how it would feel to put on a tank top with strings for straps, like an American fashion model, or to put on unmatching clothes for one day. For a long time, I watched, and each new girl who walked by had a different style, a different way of walking and dressing and doing her hair. In this strange place, it seemed anything was possible.

Mrs. Whitney used big words all the time, like “industrialization” and “existential,” and she didn’t explain each one to us like we were children. She asked questions about our opinions that didn’t have any right answers at all, and it was confusing. What do you say to a question like, “Would *Jane Eyre* be a better story if it started only when Jane became an adult?” or “Why do you think King Lear’s daughters treated him this way?” She never yelled at anyone for saying the wrong thing. She had read all of the books that were abridged in our textbook, books like *Paradise Lost* (and she said it was a poem!), *Jane Eyre*, and *King Lear*, and she told us about the parts that the textbook left out. Sometimes she brought the books in and read pages of them to us. With the Shakespeare plays, she even let us read different roles aloud, as if we were acting.

English class was from noon to one, just before lunch. In the second week of school, when the bells outside rang and the girls poured out of English class or sat down with their friends and opened their tiffins for lunch, I walked up to the front of the room. As I got closer, I noticed that she was not that tall as I had thought, perhaps only 5’6”, but her straight posture made her seem taller.

“Mrs. Whitney?” I braced myself to be scolded.

“Yes? What is your name again? I’m sorry—I’m still having trouble learning all of your names.”

“There’s a hundred and forty people in class. Why are you trying to learn all of our names?” I was feeling a bit bolder. “My name is Asha Mehtani.”

“I want to learn all of your names. Hello, Asha.”

I tried to decide whether to ask her more, and I almost turned around and sat back down.

“Have you really read all of these books?” I asked.

“Yes, most of them, many of them when I was your age. Some when I was even younger.” It seemed like a lot of books to have read as a teenager.

“In school?”

“Yes.”

“I wanted to read one of them, but the library here doesn’t have anything, and I don’t have a membership to a lending library. My mother says men don’t marry women who are too educated. I’m supposed to do very well in my studies, and my parents will allow me to study business in PUC, but that’s it.”

Mrs. Whitney frowned for a moment, pushed her hair back the way she had in class when we kept calling her “Ma’am.” I hoped I hadn’t offended her by speaking so directly.

“Let’s get you a copy,” she said. “Is there a book you had in mind?”

“I want to read *Great Expectations* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Romeo and Juliet*. I remember the summaries from them from 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> standard. Am I really old enough to read these?”

“You know, Asha, most of these people *wrote* these books when they were still teenagers, or in their early twenties—of course you’re old enough to read them.”

The room had cleared out. Most of the girls ate their lunches outside. Those who remained in the dark classroom sat near the back of the room, looking down at their food, trying not to stare at me.

“Asha, can you point me to the library? I want to see it.”

I pointed out the window, across the courtyard, and described the path beyond it to her, across at a diagonal and through the small corridor.

She went immediately, and I watched her through the window. She rose high above the other girls, and her skin looked like a bedsheet next to the dark South Indians. There was something almost comical about the purple skirt she wore and her long, purposeful steps across the courtyard. It seemed that, compared to the others, Mrs. Whitney knew exactly where she was going. I wanted to learn how to walk like that.

A few days later, Mrs. Whitney pulled me aside after class and gave a paperback copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. It was green and had a painting of a brown-haired woman on the cover.

“Do you have a dictionary at home?” she asked.

“Yes.”



“If there are words here you don’t know, you can look them up, but mostly the language isn’t too hard once you get the hang of it. And this copy belongs to you, so don’t be afraid to write in it.”

“*Write?* In a *book?* Isn’t that defacing it?” I remembered my mother’s reprimands when we accidentally left shoes too near our schoolbooks—it was disrespectful to the books, she said. But actually writing in them? That seemed much worse.

“It depends on whose opinion you believe,” said Mrs. Whitney. “I write in my books. I want to remember what made me laugh, what I thought was important or interesting, what I wanted to go back and look at again.”

“Oh. I like that.” I looked at the book again, imagined holding a pencil over it and marking something I liked. “This is mine? Where did you get it from?”

“I had two copies at home,” she said. “You were in luck.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Whitney leaned a little closer to me and said in a low voice, “I talked to Sister Mary Catherine yesterday. I convinced her that having a better library would bring prestige to the college.” Mrs. Whitney paused and gave me a look like I was her friend, her co-conspirator. “And international students.”

International students had to give colleges a much bigger donation for admission, often thirty or forty thousand rupees. “And?” I asked.

“And she’s letting me make a few improvements.”

All day, when my other teachers droned on about the stock exchange and the proper format of a ledger, I imagined what the nicer library might look like, thought

about what I might learn in English class this year, and most of all, wondered what was in this book, sitting in my bag, waiting for me.

I shut the door to my bedroom that night while the rest of my family watched the cricket match. India was doing quite well, it seemed—we had one of the best cricket teams in decades. Every time I looked, someone new had scored a century. Sometimes both batters were over a hundred.

I stared at the thing in my hands. The book was just a book, like others I'd read when I was little, but it seemed more intriguing because the world wanted to keep me and my classmates away from it.

I sat on the bed with pillows behind me and started reading. At first the language was difficult, but Mrs. Whitney was right—I picked up the rhythm of it, and after the first few chapters, it seemed natural for everyone to talk this way. They addressed each other as Miss Bennett and Miss Bingley, even though they were the same age. Even Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Bennett called each other by last name. They were strange customs, but no stranger than our Uncles and Aunties would have seemed to them.

And I was caught in the story before long. If I didn't understand a word, I couldn't bear to stop long enough to look it up, so I skipped it, or tried to figure it out by the words around it. I was so upset that Mr. Bingley left, and even more upset when I learned whose fault it was. How could he do that to his friend, and to Elizabeth, and to Jane? I was as shocked as Elizabeth to learn that he loved her, even though I remembered from the summary that they end up married.

It was different this way. I could actually picture myself as Elizabeth, walking three miles to visit her sister in the mud or agonizing over what Lydia had done to their family. My mother was much smarter than Mrs. Bennet and my father less sarcastic than Mr. Bennet, but how was it that centuries earlier in a different place, someone could have written a story whose world looked so much like India?

I kept reading, even though it was quite late, and when I finished the book, it was already four o'clock. By then, I had decided that I would look for love and not just money in choosing a husband, and that I would never marry a Mr. Collins, even if he was willing to take me.

I was so tired I couldn't sleep, no matter how hard I tried. I shut my eyes and willed myself to sleep, but my body wouldn't cooperate. I got up and looked out the window for a few minutes, then lay back down, then got up again. After a while, I found myself walking outside in the dark.

I passed a few houses I knew—the Subramaniam's house next door, that house with the green-painted terrace, the large blue house with the clownish gargoyles on top—and then road became unfamiliar and empty. I had never been this way before.

I came to a house on a large, grassy hill, and I climbed the winding driveways and staircases. A big door opened, and I entered a great ballroom with chandeliers high up, men with violins, two pianos, a group of people dancing on one side, tables on the other side, and women in saris or western dresses and men in suits. Some were Indian and some were white, and they were dancing with and talking to each other. The curtains were made of layers of silk and lace. And instead of pajamas, I wore a white silk sari.

My family was all there with me, including some of my cousins from America. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned around and saw a man I was sure was Mr. Darcy from the book. He was fair-skinned, and looked like an American movie star. “Yes?” I said.

“May I claim the next two dances with you, if you are not otherwise engaged?” He spoke with a British accent.

“Of course,” I said. The music was different, slightly Indian and slightly western, and it wasn’t the kind of dancing that people do at clubs. It was more like the dancing that people do in black-and-white American movies. Somehow I knew all the steps.

“When did you know you were in love with Elizabeth?” I asked him.

“At the Lucases’ ball.”

“I thought it was later, when she came to Netherfield to look after Jane.”

“By then, I was sure that I loved her, but even before then I began to look at her. When she and the eldest Miss Lucas were laughing at me for rejecting her—that was, I believe, the moment I began to love her.”

“And did you know she was at Pemberley when you ran into her there? You went home a day early on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Miss Mehtani, we are only still at the ball at Netherfield. That does not happen for another 100 pages at least.”

“Oh.”

We danced in silence for a while longer, now to a slower song than the last one.

“Do you know why they are keeping you from reading about me?” he asked as he stepped back and I stepped forward at a controlled, even pace.

“Why?”

“Because they are afraid that you will begin thinking.”

In the next few weeks, Mrs. Whitney let me borrow other books of hers. I read *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which became easy after I grew used to its language and the customs in the stories. I read *Of Mice and Men* from the far west of America, and *Gone With the Wind* from the south. My parents believed I was being very studious, poring over math and commerce in the evenings instead of watching movies and MTV.

When I gave back *Gone With the Wind* after class, Mrs. Whitney said excitedly, “Guess what.”

“What?”

“The ceiling fell in on the library.”

“That’s a good thing?” Even the few books we had would now be ruined. And that poor, stern old nun—what job would they give her now that there was no library?

“Sister Mary Catherine has to use an existing classroom for the library now.” She smiled. The classrooms were three times bigger than the library. “And she’s letting me set it up.”

“Where are all the books coming from?”

“Everywhere. I have friends and relatives sending books from America, for now, and I’ve sent away to publishers to give us desk copies of more of them. I already have a couple boxes full in my apartment, and there’ll be more soon.”

Just like that, boxes of free books to put on shelves. I didn’t even know what a desk copy was. “Is there anything you think I might enjoy?”

“There’s plenty I think you’d enjoy,” she said. “How did you like *Gone With the Wind*?”

“I loved it. I wish I could be like Scarlett. I wish I could just go about my business and not care about anyone else, or that I could sew a dress from curtains to trick Rhett Butler. It was all so clever.”

“This is from South, too. It’s very different from the things you’ve already read,” she said as she pulled a book from her bag, “It’s going to be really, really hard to read, but it’s worth it. If you don’t understand it, you can talk to me about it. I didn’t fully understand it the first time I read it, either.”

*The Sound and the Fury* it was called. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Don’t read the introduction until you’ve read the book,” she said. “It gives too much of the story away. Would you like to help me with the library?”

I stared at her, shocked. “What?”

“The new library. Would you like to help?”

“What could *I* do?”

“We’ll find something.”

The next day at lunchtime, we went into the classroom that would become the library. Dust lay on rows and rows of wood benches and long tables bolted to the floor. Mrs. Whitney carried one box of books, and I carried the other. We dropped them onto one of the tables and quietly looked around.

The space was big. Small windows covered one entire wall—with pink-painted bars, of course, like all the classroom windows. Tiny rays of light came in, just enough to illuminate the dust and dinginess. The walls were gray and the layers of paint had

been peeled away by girls sitting next to walls for thirty or forty years, leaving big white gouges in places.

“This, I think, will work well,” Mrs. Whitney said. I couldn’t believe she would say that about this ugly, dull room.

“What should we do with it?”

“I’ll work on getting Sister Mary Catherine to shell out money for shelves and for renovating the room. Once we get a few more books, you’ll be in charge of categorizing them and deciding where they go.”

That seemed like a big responsibility.

Over the next two months, Mrs. Whitney and I worked together almost every day at lunch. She asked me questions like “How do you like school?” and “Do you get along with your brothers and sisters?” and “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I found it strange for a teacher to actually ask questions about my life. At first I thought she was just being nice, but then it seemed like she wasn’t just doing it to fill the time—it seemed like she actually cared. She was as interested in learning about me and about India as I was in learning about her mysterious American background. I lost my fear of asking questions.

“Why did you come here to teach?” I asked her one day, when we were painting the walls off-white after school with giant paint rollers (cheaper for us to do it, said Sister Mary Catherine when Mrs. Whitney asked her if we could call in painters).

“My husband Michael got transferred here with Apple, and I used to teach English back home. I wanted to teach here, too.”

“What part of America did you come from?”

“We lived in San Francisco. It’s in California, in the West.”

“I have cousins in San Diego. Is it close?”

“It’s actually quite far, even though it’s also in California. You remember the Salinas valley from *Of Mice and Men*? That’s much closer than San Diego.”

I wondered how big and lovely a place California must be, with so much space. My second cousins always talked about how clean their beaches are, how blue the water is, how bright the world is compared to the dirt of India. “Do you miss California?” I asked. “It must be hard to be so far from your family.”

“Not really.”

“Don’t you miss your parents?”

“I’m not very close to my parents.”

Something in her tone of voice told me to change the subject, no matter how much I wanted to hear about California. “Why didn’t you get a job with an international school?”

“Not as much fun,” she said.

“And your husband doesn’t mind that you work, and that you read so much?”

“It doesn’t matter if he minds,” she said, “which he doesn’t. He prefers a smart and independent wife. I wouldn’t have married anyone who didn’t.”

“I guess it works like that in America.”

“Not really,” she said. “Many men feel threatened by educated women and would prefer someone more, well, domestic.”

“How old were you when you got married?”

“I was twenty-seven. That was about three years ago.”



Twenty-seven! It would be eleven years until I reached that age. Imagine what I could do with eleven whole years. “That’s old for a girl in India.”

“That’s old for a girl in America, too. But he was worth the wait.”

A little river of paint started falling down the wall, and I caught it with my thumb and pushed it back up. “My parents are going to make me get married soon, probably in two years. Most guys here want wives who can cook and stay home, take care of the servants, and raise the kids. I don’t think I want to marry a stranger.”

“Then you shouldn’t,” she said. “Don’t tell your parents that I said that—the school might fire me for it—but your life is yours, not your mother’s.”

In those months, Mrs. Whitney became like a friend, even though she was a teacher. She told me about books she had enjoyed, her visit to Thailand and Malaysia, all of the places and things in India she still wanted to see. I had never been out of India, and it seemed funny to me that India would seem so exotic to someone.

I started to discover things about her, little and insignificant secrets. Mrs. Whitney smoked cigarettes, kept them hidden during the day but went behind a palm tree every few hours in between classes. She didn’t like doughnuts. She used to play tennis. I coveted these little things and eavesdropped on sentences that slipped out, sometimes when she thought no one was listening, like, “Why does Indian coffee have to come in these ridiculous little Dixie cups?” or “There’s dirt in *everything*.”

But these tiny scraps of information about her didn’t help me learn much, and there were questions I dared not ask. What had her parents done that she wasn’t close to them? Why didn’t she miss her home? If I didn’t know her, and I had only heard that

there was such a woman, the sort of woman who moved to the other side of the world and didn't miss her parents, I would have assumed that she was a bad person. But Mrs. Whitney was just complicated, and mysterious—I knew her, but at the same time, I didn't know her at all.

I had to find an excuse for staying late at the college each day. I thought about telling my parents I was taking French lessons at Alliance Française. Every excuse I thought of cost money, and they would find out soon enough. The possibility of taking tuitions in math crossed my mind, a good reason for coming home late, but most tutors came to the house. And Papa would know that I didn't need help in math.

For dinner that night we ate vegetarian, *aloo gobi*, *bhindi*, and *dal*, a simple meal. We all sat down at the table—Mama, Papa, me, my sister Tara, and my brother Manish. Mama had taught the new servant how to make Sindhi food, and she learned quite well. The *bhindi* was fried first, so it didn't get gooey like some people make it.

“How was school?” Mama asked all of us. I was counting on Tara to talk for a while.

“There was this boy in my class, Raviraj, who vomited on the desk today,” said Manish.

“Ew! We're eating!” Tara screwed her nose up, making a mock-disgusted face.

“No one wants to hear about stupid Raviraj and his vomiting.”

“What? I was just saying. Mama asked how school was, and I was telling her about the day.”

“You’re supposed to talk about geometry and biology, or the noodles at the canteen, or how someone fell down when they were playing cricket. Nobody cares about people vomiting.”

“Tara.” Mama looked across the table at both of them bickering. “Now you’re talking about vomiting too. Stop. Asha, how is college going?”

What could I say? “It’s going fine.”

“Are you doing well so far?” Papa asked from the head of the table. “First rank last time. That’s my daughter.” He tore off a piece of his *roti* and scooped up some potatoes with it.

Tara rolled her eyes at me.

“I’m doing well. I like my subjects.”

“That’s nice,” said Mama.

“I’m in a theatre competition,” I blurted out.

“How fun!” Tara said. “I want to be in a theatre competition. I want to play the heroine who falls in love with the hero, but then the parents don’t approve, and then we have to sneak away, and then the parents approve finally and we have a big wedding and sing and—”

“It’s not a Hindi movie, Tara. It’s a play.”

“It’s not a Hindi movie, Tara.” She imitated me in a high-pitched, nasally voice.

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

I looked over at my mother. “Is it okay if I participate? In the competition?”

“Is it a group from the college?”

“It’s all girls from the college. No boys.”

“That’s okay then. When is the competition?”

“I don’t know yet.”

We ate in silence for a while, though Manish and Tara had started kicking each other under the table.

“What play is it?” Papa looked up from his plate at me.

I couldn’t think of a name. I knew full well that a competition would have a short play, that nothing by Shakespeare would do. There was a book in one of Mrs. Whitney’s boxes, I remembered, with a purple title. It was a very thin book, and I had read on the back cover that it was a play.

“Rhinoceros.” I didn’t what it was about, where I had seen it, who wrote it, nothing.

“What’s the story?” asked Mama.

“It’s about a zookeeper.”

“Then what happens?” Tara asked. “That’s a funny name for a play.”

“Uh, the zookeeper is in charge of the rhinoceros, and the rhinoceros runs away. The zookeeper chases him, and all the people in the city are scared that he will come and ruin their homes. But they catch him in the end and put him back in the zoo.” I wanted to kick myself. What a stupid idea for a play.

“I want to come see it,” Tara said. “It sounds so much fun. Mama, can I go to see it? Pleeeeease?”

“It’s not open to the public. Only judges.” This was getting much too complicated.

“Sneak me in. Come on, I look like a girl at the college. I want to see a rhinoceros running around on stage. Do you have a real one?”

“No. And no I’m not sneaking you in.”

“Does someone play the rhinoceros?” Manish asked. “What does it look like?”

“Two people play it,” I said. “One plays its head and one hunches over where its bum is. They have a big grey costume with horns on it.” Did a rhinoceros have one horn? Two? Maybe it had lots of horns on its back, or was that a sort of dinosaur? I couldn’t remember.

“Whom will you play?” Papa asked.

“The photographer.” I looked over at Tara. “Tara, didn’t you say you were having trouble with geometry?”

“Yeah, it’s so stupid. I hate math so much. People don’t *need* it in real life. When am I going to need to know how to find the hypotenuse of some dumb triangle or the angle of a shadow from a tree at five in the evening, or the average speed of a cow running twelve kilometers in fifty minutes or whatever stupid story problem I have?”

“Tara,” said Papa sternly. “Math is important. You’ll see how much you use it when you’re a grown woman.” Papa spent the rest of dinner extolling the virtues of math.

After dinner, we went to the den, and Mama and Papa put on a Hindi movie—something old, from the seventies. The woman was kidnapped by a bandit, it seemed, and her husband had to save her.

“Asha,” Tara whispered after about five minutes of the film. “Come upstairs.”

“Okay.”

“Mama, we’re bored of the movie. We’re going upstairs,” I said.

She nodded.

Tara closed my room door behind her and sat down, cross-legged on my bed. She stared at me as I sat down.

“What?” I asked. “I know. You’re mad that I started Papa on math.”

She continued staring, quietly. It was strange how much like a woman my sister looked. She had turned into someone fair and tall, but still somehow with enormous energy. And she had the kind of confidence that made her move without hesitation or regret, without a doubt of what people would think. At fourteen, she looked more comfortable in her body than I was in mine.

“No,” she said.

“What, then?”

“Why did you lie about the Rhinoceros play?” She smiled at me.

“I wasn’t lying. What are you talking about?”

She started bouncing on the bed. “Asha, come on. You were lying like crazy. You’re a *horrible* liar.”

She was right—I was a horrible liar. “How did you know?”

“You should sound sure of yourself when you’re lying. Don’t hesitate or say ‘um’ or anything. Also, you talk too fast when you’re lying. Talk like normal.”

“Wait, you knew I was lying and you still begged Mama and Papa to let you come?”

“Well, *you* made Papa start on math. And anyway, I wanted keep seeing you try to lie. It was so funny.”

I wanted to hit her with a pillow, but thought the better of it. “Did they notice?”

“I don’t think so. Old people are *so* oblivious. Don’t worry, I won’t tell them... But...”

“But what?”

“I’ll only keep the secret if you tell me the whole story. Do you have a boyfriend? What does he look like? What’s his name? Where does he go to college? Come on, tell me. I won’t tell Mama, and I won’t say a word around Manish. I promise.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Tell me, then. What are you doing after college all these days that you’re supposed to be in the stupid rhinoceros play with girls running around playing an animal’s bum?”

“That was a little too much, wasn’t it?” We both started laughing.

“Horrible,” she said.

“Okay, fine. I have an English teacher who’s been giving me books, and she’s building a new library at the college. I’m helping her with the library. I’ve been bunking classes to read.”

“That’s *it*? You’re such a nerd!”

“Just don’t say anything about it.”

“Why? All you’re doing is reading and working on a library. What’s wrong with that? Other than it being the dorkiest thing ever.”

“Tara.”

“What? They want us to do well in our studies. They won’t be mad at you.”

“This isn’t my studies, though. Mama made it quite clear when I started that I could only do commerce.”

“I know, I know.” She switched her voice to a thickly accented and low one, imitating our mother. “If you’re too smart, no man will marry you.” She started laughing hard, making the bed shake.

“What?”

“Plenty of men will want to marry me. I don’t even know how to find a stupid hypotenuse.”

I started reading *The Sound and the Fury* that night. At first I was so mad at the book that I wanted to throw it at the wall. I couldn’t figure when anything was happening, and even the simplest plot things were so hard to understand that I considered giving the book back to Mrs. Whitney, saying, “I don’t get it. I can’t believe you’d give me something so impossible. I’m not smart enough to figure this out. Aren’t you supposed to be a teacher? Aren’t you supposed to know that I’m not ready for a book that doesn’t make any sense?” But I couldn’t go back to her until I had figured this out. I couldn’t even cheat and read the introduction. This was some sort of test. It wasn’t on paper, but it felt more important than four years of exams put together.

What was it about Caddy that Jason hated so much? What did she do? When I stared at the book and asked Caddy, all she told me was “Look closer. You’ll find it.” I flipped back and read parts again, moved around the book out of sequence to see what Quentin the man said about Caddy and what Quentin the girl said about her mother. I



tried to decipher which Quentin Benjy talked about when, because I didn't know that there were two Quentins the first time I read the beginning. It was crazy. I had never read a book like this before, where I had to move everywhere, back and forth, to see where and when I was. I started dreaming about the characters, talking to them and asking them what was going on. Sometimes I talked to them in the forest behind their house, and sometimes I just watched them talk to each other in the kitchen. I even asked the servant, since servants usually know everything that's happening in the house. And when I figured out who Quentin the girl really was, I couldn't believe it. But there it was—the answer was in there, in the very beginning of the book, and that's why Jason hated Caddy so much.

I read *The Sound and the Fury* for two weeks, parts of it over and over, and the library came along nicely. I began to see what Mrs. Whitney saw in it. The walls were lighter, and it made the room seem larger. Without the rows of benches and tables waiting to have rows of girls packed tightly into them, the space was much less gloomy.

Sister Mary Catherine did agree to pay for shelves, light wood shelves where all the rows of benches had been. Mrs. Whitney had them lay carpet down—carpet! —that was a deep, rich blue. A few long tables with wooden chairs in front of them lined the walls, and a small white lamp sat on each table. The windows still had bars on them, but there were sheer curtains on top of those bars to make the place seem more like a home than a school. No more podium, either; just a desk by the door with a few necessities on it. Proper light fixtures lined the ceiling, not a single tubelight. She even had a ceiling fan installed.

In the meantime, the books kept arriving from the publishers, sometimes boxes of them. Anthologies of fiction and poetry, science books, books on quantum physics, books about Maori culture and women in Ghana, books about computers and the Internet. New books, old books, new books about old things. Journals and magazines about medicine, education, chemistry, finance, history, and places in the world I had never even heard of.

Mrs. Whitney set me to the task of organizing all of these books into some sort of system. I started out arranging things in categories of what they were, like novels, poetry, science, history, computers, culture, and so on, but even within those categories I had to separate things. American literature, European, Indian. Eastern culture, western culture. Chemistry, biology, psychology, anthropology, physics, math. A lot of books had both fiction and poetry in them, so I moved them and made a separate anthology section. Most of this I did sitting on the blue carpet with books all around me, putting them in piles on the ground and on chairs. I would open the curtains to let light and the warm wind in. I sometimes read the first chapter or two to figure out what the books were, but then found myself still reading and neglecting the work I should have been doing. I was alone the entire time, but it was such fun. I didn't feel the need to try to make friends with the girls in my courses.

I only saw Mrs. Whitney in class, where she had begun to make photocopies of parts of books for us to read to supplement the abridged versions we had. I didn't need to borrow from her, because I had the library now—no one would notice if I took one of the books home and brought it back a few days later.

I read a little bit of everything, and discovered things I couldn't even imagine. I learned about what makes people bipolar, and what ways there are to treat them. There was an article about schizophrenia in a medical journal, and the people who wrote it were trying to figure out if there are warning signs in the brains of schizophrenics—it was hard to understand, and I had to look in the dictionary for strange, long words. I read an essay about female circumcision, written by a woman who went through it when she was younger than me. There were animals I had never seen and histories of countries I didn't know existed. I even learned about sex from medical books, not just vague things about boys and girls doing something together when they get married, but details that no one in India would dare tell me.

Once I categorized all the books, shelved them, labeled the shelves, and made a log of each of the books to keep track of them, Mrs. Whitney came back in to look at what I had done and how I had chosen to set everything up. I didn't understand what had made her entrust me, not one of the older girls, with this important task.

I sat on the carpet at the front of the room and watched her examine my work. She walked around the room, snaking through one shelf and then another, pulling books off and putting them back again. It was over two minutes before she answered, "It looks wonderful."

All those hours of shelving and moving books, piling stacks up all around me, and writing in those logs had paid off.

"I'm going to tell Sister Mary Catherine it's finished and let her know how much of a help you've been. She should know how much money you've saved the college."

“Don’t tell her,” I said. “Don’t tell her I helped.” It’s not as if she would tell my parents, but better to be safe.

“If you’d like. I’ll see you in class, Asha.” She walked past me and out the door, heels leaving a trail of half-moon impressions in the carpet. Looking up at all these neatly stacked bookshelves, I felt incredible pride and a strange sense of loss. The library was done.

Sister Margaret, the old nun who ran the old library, didn’t want to be in charge of this one, so they put her in the main office and gave Sister Theresa the library. She was a South Indian, from Kerala, and was not yet twenty, the youngest nun I had ever seen. I didn’t realize they allowed people to become nuns that young.

Sister Mary Catherine, large and domineering as always, opened the library on a Monday during lunch, and invited the students to come see it. She also invited the parents who donated the most money, particularly the international students’ parents and the ones who owned big businesses and retail shops in the city. We started out in the auditorium, where Sister Mary Catherine made a speech in which she took credit for the idea and the building. “We appreciate the generosity of donors who have made this possible. Knowledge for our girls,” she said, “is worth all of the money the college has spent to build this library.”

**Chapter 2: “You Can’t Put it off Forever”**

School was a sanctuary. I loved the library, I loved the voice of Mrs. Whitney as she read us passages from *Bleak House* and from *Macbeth*, and I loved the feeling of accomplishment for all I had learned so far. But there was still the matter of my other classes. I would sit in the back bench by myself—no one else wanted it, even though it was empty and girls were six to a bench everywhere else—and get scolded often for it by each of my teachers. I put books inside my ledger and my notebooks, so I could read during class. By October, I had learned that I could skip class and sit on the wide steps by the basketball court, and no one would miss me. Of course, Miss Maryanne and Miss Kamala would see me and yell at me every few days, but ultimately they could do nothing about it. The college required 80% attendance in all classes for the academic year. By December, I could reach no more than 60% if I attended all of my classes from then on. But it only cost 500 rupees to bribe the principal’s office, and then—like magic—your attendance percentage would change to the necessary 80%. I was slowly saving my spending money.

I even spent my evenings in the library at school, unwilling to go home. Home was quickly becoming an uncomfortable and stifling place, even with the familiar smell of curry leaves and cumin in the air, the sound of Tara and Manish fighting over their newest toys, the cricket matches and Hindi movies on television, even the impromptu visits of Uncles and Aunties for tea and biscuits. All of this had once given me the impression that I would be nostalgic for it when I was older. But now I felt like more and more of a stranger to things I had known all my life.

When study holidays came along in late January, my secret school life gave way to two months at home all day and all evening, meant for studying for 11<sup>th</sup> exams. Six subjects: Commerce, Economics, Accounting, Math, English, and Hindi. English and Hindi I was far from worried about, but I had neglected the other four subjects all year. Exams started at the end of March, and it was only January. It was during these two months that I discovered the Internet.

Tara had study holidays too, and we spent the mornings together when Mama was at the market buying fruits and vegetables, overseeing the servants, or watching Hindi serials on TV.

On a morning that first week of holidays, I lay on my bed reading an old *National Geographic*—each page of each issue was beautiful, and I had never imagined a magazine like it. And the stories about mating rituals of wild mammals in Africa, about life in the deepest parts of the ocean, about tigers stalking their prey, were fascinating. It must have been noon already when Tara crashed through the door of my room.

“Asha. Let’s leave.”

“Where? Aren’t you studying?”

“You’re not.” She glanced at my magazine with feigned disappointment. “It’s so *hot* in here. And my exams don’t start until March. It’s not even Feb yet.”

“Where? You want to go see a movie?”

Tara flopped down next to my legs on the bed. “Let’s just go to Brigade Road or Commercial Street. We’ll find *chaat* in a little *gulli* or something. We’ll tell Mama we’re taking a break.”

A crouching tiger stared up at me quizzically from the magazine page. “Okay.”

Before I could even get up, Tara was running loudly down the stairs, yelling “Ma-maaaa! Can Asha and me go to Brigades for a study break? We’ll be back by tea.”

I walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. My mother was talking while dicing an onion into tiny squares. The servant, Lakshmi, was crushing coconut and chilies with a large wooden mortar and pestle. South Indian food—there would be *masala dosas* and a whole bowl of coconut chutney tonight.

“Take the driver.”

“No, we don’t want the driver. We’ll take an auto,” said Tara.

“Asha?” My mother’s eyes were completely dry, despite the onion.

“We’ll take an auto. It’s a nice day. Keep the driver—how else will Manish get home from school?”

“How is the studying going?” she asked me.

“Great,” I lied. “I’ve been working on math all day, but I’m tired of looking at all these radians and thetas.”

“We need spending money,” said Tara.

“Tara, I just gave you a hundred rupees on Monday.”

“I spent it.”

“Asha?” She turned to me.

“I don’t have any left. I haven’t taken money from you since before holidays.” It was a bit of a lie. I had twenty rupees, but I stashed it away as part of the five hundred I would need the next month.

She told me to take two hundred from her purse, and to make it last. I went upstairs to unlock her cupboard and take the money, and by the time I got to the gate,

Tara had already flagged an auto rickshaw. We scooted into the tiny vehicle on the green-plastic-upholstered seat, and Tara said, “Brigade Road.” The old Muslim man—we could tell by the small white crocheted cap—turned around and nodded. We started riding bumpily through burst after burst of exhaust fumes.

“We’re going to go play with the Internet,” she said. She could hardly sit still. “There’s a new Internet cafe, and it’s only thirty rupees for a whole hour for each of us. You took two hundred?”

I looked at her, smiling. “I took two-fifty. Mama will never notice.”

“Asha!” She looked at me disapprovingly for a fraction of a second, but she couldn’t sustain it. We both started laughing.

We got off at Brigade Road, which was crowded for so early in the afternoon. People jostled each other everywhere. Men tried to brush past us, and we strategically glided sideways through the crowd. The beggar girl in the yellow frock who was usually on the M-G road side had migrated over to the other end of Brigades and was poking people in the legs, saying, “Ma. Ma.” She started following me, poking hard at my thigh with all five of her fingers formed in a little spear. “Ma.” She put her spear-hand to her mouth and poked me again with it. I walked faster.

“Just give her a rupee,” said Tara as the girl stalked us down the street.

“Don’t,” I said.

Tara reached into her pocket, found an old, crumpled rupee bill, and shoved it in the girl’s hand. “Here. Happy?” she said.



And there were instantly four more people on us, hands to their mouths and then tapping us on the shoulders and arms, grabbing our legs. We ducked into a tiny, air-conditioned store full of women's clothing, and the group of beggars moved elsewhere.

"You can't give them money," I said.

"I know. That girl is so annoying, though. I just want her to leave!"

We walked back out and across, through the mass of one-way traffic coming at us, motorbikes and scooters, cycles, rickshaws, cars, vans.

Inside the café, the furniture was all quite modern, and the air conditioning made the place properly frigid. The chalked sign by the counter announced that cappuccinos were fifteen rupees and an hour of Internet was thirty.

"Posh."

"My friend told me about it," said Tara.

"Who?"

"Rekha." I had never heard of Rekha. Tara was the kind of girl with fifty different friends, and never the same fifty six months later.

"Give me money," she said, holding her hand out like a persistent beggar.

I handed her a hundred rupees from my purse. Tara walked up to the counter, ordered us both cappuccinos, and bought an hour of Internet use for each of us.

"This better be worth thirty rupees each," I mumbled as the young, dark man walked us over to our computers and laid down cards next to them with the time written on them.

Tara and I sat down next to each other, and I looked at the screen. I had used computers before, at friends' and relatives' houses, so I knew how a mouse worked. But

I wasn't really sure about the Internet. I had heard of it, of course, and of e-mail—our relatives and friends in America kept telling us in letters and phone calls that we *simply must* get e-mail.

“Have you done this before?” I asked Tara, looking at the screen full of strange pictures.

“Yup. I've come here with Rekha. The man connected it for us, so all you have to do is go on the Internet.” She reached over and put my mouse on the Netscape icon. “Type in the top ‘Yahoo,’ and you can search for anything you want.”

Could I ever. Everything that I had been reading about was on there, and every page had things underlined in blue that would carry you to other pages with more information. I thought about the tiger I left at home, staring from my bed, waiting for the page to be turned on him. *Tigers*, I wrote and pressed Search.

There were pages with different kinds of tigers, tigers' mating practices, tiger cubs, American sports teams called Tigers, a brand of clothing called Tiger, pictures of tigers, a poem about a tiger called The Tyger with pictures of wood prints that went with it. I typed in *art*, and pages on American art, European art, painting, oriental rugs, pottery, and every conceivable thing related to art showed up. I started looking through Yahoo's categories on literature, art, science, history—this was like a whole library, both huge and tiny at the same time.

“You want me to set up an e-mail address for you?”

I was clicking away at something about modern inventors. “Huh? Oh. I do.”

I got up, but she said, “No, I can do it from here. Rekha showed me. Even I have one.”

She started clicking and typing, and in a few minutes she told me how to get to my email. “I sent you an email from my email address,” she said.

I found it. “Dear Asha, Hello!!! This is your new email address!!! Do you like it? Love, Tara” the screen said to me.

“Push Reply, and give me an answer.” she said.

“Dear Tara, I like it very much. Love, Asha,” I wrote and sent to her. She opened it immediately.

“Is it that fast even sending mail to America?” I asked.

“Yes, it is!” she said. “It’s so cool! And there’s everything on the Internet, even dirty movies and pictures.”

“*Don’t* look at any of that.”

After that day, I started telling my mother that I was studying with friends, and I brought all my schoolbooks to the Internet cafe a few times a week. I took money from her every two or three days, saying that I would need it if we went for a coffee or bought some *chaat* or Chinese noodles from a little shop. I didn’t have any friends to study with, but Mama didn’t know that. I still read books at home all day, but now there was even more to learn.

And then it was mid-March. Exams were hardly a week away, and I had a full year of four subjects to catch up on. I started studying all day and night, memorizing definitions word for word the way I had to. These books were so unclear, and put things out of sequence. The unit circle was at the *end* of Trigonometry—no wonder I couldn’t understand sine-squared-this and cosine-squared-that! Trigonometry and functions became a little clearer after I read an American textbook from the library on them. I just

memorized as much of the rest of our commerce, economics, and accounting textbooks as I could. It all made very little sense.

I went to sleep at midnight and woke up at three in the morning, a little amazed at my own discipline. I turned on MTV or Channel V, watched obscure American rock videos while trying to understand ICICI and the world's different stock markets. The videos were more interesting—songs that were not popular in India, people in flannel shirts smashing guitars, swinging on chandeliers in the rain, walking back and forth aimlessly on empty streets.

When exams came along, I found myself sitting in the same classroom I had spent much of the past nine months in. Bars on the windows, the tables and benches cramped, the heat stifling. I wrote on pages of cheap paper with pen, scrawled answers to things I hadn't even begun to understand. The London Stock Exchange and the New York Stock Exchange mocked me from the question paper, laughing, "Haha. Asha does not know what we are or how we are different." Little thetas stared at me like cartoon eyes, waiting to be calculated upon. "Turn me into a cosine. Do it!" yelled an almost-hidden sine-squared-beta, cocking his head toward his alpha counterpart.

I used up a whole packet of tissues during the week wiping sweat from my face, not because I was nervous but because of the heat; the still room smelled like a sickening mixture of sweat and coconut hair oil. The silence was strange for a room of so many girls—all I could hear was a few distant monkeys screeching and girls whispering answers to each other. I found myself tempted to listen to them.

During the early days of summer holidays, I spent a lot of time at home reading. Exam results had not yet been announced, and I no longer had the excuse of studying to take me away from home. In May, Papa went to Lagos on business and Mama started inviting groups of her friends over for tea and dinner. Many of them also had husbands who traveled, husbands who lived overseas most of the year, or husbands who hated to socialize.

One incredibly hot day, Mama and I worked in the kitchen to get everything ready for tea. I made the tea, and Mama opened the packets of biscuits, cakes, and *chiveda* and put all the food in little plates. As I fought to open a new packet of tea leaves, Mama said, “Do you remember Alka Auntie from Spain?”

“Yeah, of course. She’s the one who visited a few years back with her kids.” They had stayed with us for two nights. The daughters, Pooja and Divya, were so much fun. Tara, Manish, the two girls, and I played hide-and-seek and ghost house (the hide-and-seek in the dark game). We played cards together, too, and they taught us all sorts of games they learned from Spain. Her son acted too old to play with us. He must have been fourteen or fifteen then, and all of us twelve or younger.

“She’s in town, and she’s coming today.”

“Oh, that’s great! Did she bring her daughters with her?”

“No, she didn’t. She’s come alone. I want you to try to make a good impression on her.”

I was always well-behaved, much more so than Tara and Manish. I yanked the two sides of the sealed plastic package hard, and it popped open finally, sending a spray of tea leaves all over. “Did I do something wrong?” I knelt to pick up the leaves.

“No, nothing like that.” Her green sari swept the floor ever so slightly as she moved around the kitchen getting plates and food.

“What then?”

“It’s just... Alka Aunty will be looking in a year or two for her son. Make a good impression on her. She might think of you.”

“That guy? He was so boring when we met him! I can’t believe you’d want me to marry him.” That boy, that high-and-mighty know-it-all who thought he was so much better than his sisters, no doubt because he was a boy, no doubt because his parents thought him better than their other children. I dumped a few spoons of tea leaves in the pot and turned on the flame.

“Asha, you have to begin thinking about these things. You can’t put it off forever.”

“Plus, isn’t she related to us?”

“She’s my second cousin. It’s a distant relation.”

“Still my cousin.” I poured the milk in, added a few heaps of sugar and some *elaichi* seeds. Tiny bubbles began to come up from the edges, and I watched them rise and pop as the tea heated up.

“Asha, I have been meaning to ask you something, and I want you to be honest with me. Will you do that?”

“Of course.”

“What were you doing all of those evenings when you said you were preparing for that play?”

“What do you mean?”

“Asha, you were *not* in a play competition. I called the college a few months ago to ask, and there was no such thing happening. Why did you lie to me?” Her tone was more disappointed than angry.

“Why did you wait so long to ask me?”

“*Don’t* turn this around, Asha. Answer my question.”

But why did she wait so long? It didn’t make sense. Why not tell me right away?

“Asha?”

“Okay. I was helping build and organize the college’s new library. They asked if I would help, and I did.” Like a wax strip, easier to rip off quickly than pull slowly.

The surface of the tea began to ripple from the heat. I watched it to make sure it didn’t boil over, as tea is prone to do.

“There, that was easy. Now, answer my other question. Why did you lie to me?”

“Because I knew you would not approve.”

“Asha, it’s okay to like books. It’s okay to read. I’ve seen you sneaking away at night with books, shutting your door, and staying up late. But I don’t want you getting any airs about yourself.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re a woman now. You have responsibilities, and you must fulfill those. It’s okay to have hobbies, but if you get too attached, it will be more difficult to give them up.”

“Why do I have to? You get to watch TV, so shouldn’t I be able to read?”

“Asha, this is what I’m saying. You *can* read. You can read all you want. Just don’t allow it to change who you are.”

I wasn't sure who that was, or why it would be a bad thing to change.

"You're going to be eighteen soon. Papa and I got married when I was eighteen. You should have children while you're still young. Don't put it off because of your hobbies. Your duty is with your family."

"But what if I waited a few years? What if I went to college and then got married? Other Sindhi girls go to college. Lots of them go to college!"

"You're not other Sindhi girls. If the other girls jumped into the ocean, would you follow them?"

"Mama, it's not the same thing. They go to college and get married after."

"You would find it hard to find a husband. Sure, some women go to college, but they're the same ones who search and search until they're twenty-five, twenty-six. Some never find a husband."

"What if I don't mind if it's hard to find a husband?"

"Asha, enough. You'll find a man who can take good care of you, but only if you keep your eyes open! Enough of this nonsense. Alka Aunty will be here in a minute or two, and I want you to think." The doorbell rang right then, and my mother stood up straight as the doorway itself. "Think about your future, and stop this bullshit."

My mother had never cursed in front of me. Of course I would be polite to Alka Aunty. I wasn't in my nature to be impolite. I couldn't believe that she would doubt that.

I caught, just barely in time, the tea—it was about to boil over, foaming right to the very edge of the pot.



When exam results came out, I found myself in a teeming mass of hundreds of girls pushing each other to see the tiny paper pinned to the wall. The results would be in the newspaper the next day, but we were all impatient to know how we had performed. The west coast monsoons had come early and had blown inland, so we were all crowded under a large stone arch with rain pouring steadily off the sides, forming a strange gray bubble.

I was regretting my own impatience, being pushed farther and farther back, hit with elbows, brushed by oily hair, assaulted by high-pitched screams of excitement or despair from tens of girls at a time. I wasn't pushing forward too aggressively, partly because all of this pushing made me uncomfortable and partly because I didn't want to know how badly I had done. The girls around me dispersed after a while, and the push to the front became easier, so I moved forward.

Not bad. I thought I had done much worse than percentages in the high 70's and the 80's. People who had studied much more than me had gotten similar marks, and I felt a bit like I had cheated them. In 10<sup>th</sup>, I would have been devastated at such low marks, but somehow these didn't seem to matter that much. I had gotten much higher marks than I deserved.

Papa was disappointed that I didn't do better in my exams, but I still achieved first class in almost all subjects. He couldn't be too upset at me, because Tara's marks were much lower than mine—each year, she just barely passed into the next class. Manish, as usual, did very well. Papa and Mama had high hopes for his future, as bright a boy as he was. They hoped he would be a doctor or an engineer, or perhaps a successful banker.

For the rest of summer holidays, I still couldn't forget my mother's reaction to me that afternoon in May. I often replayed it in my head, trying to say things differently and imagine her reactions, but somehow the reactions were all the same. In one of them, I would walk into the kitchen and say, "Mama, I have something to tell you. There was no play competition." In this version, she was happy that I would admit to my lie without prompting, but the conversation still went the same way when it came to marriage. In a most extreme version, one that would never have happened, I conceded, saying, "Okay, Mama. I'll consider Alka Aunty's son. I know that you know what's best for me." She was much happier, praising my sensibility and comparing me favorably to my wild sister.

I started 12<sup>th</sup> standard in early July, not long after exam results were announced. This time I had a different English teacher, a particularly strict and ugly nun, and all my other classes were much the same as the previous year. I forgot everything the minute the exam was over, and I cared so little about the stock market, assets and liabilities, derivatives and integrals—there was nothing interesting about attending classes at all. I spent most of my time outside of class reading. Since Mrs. Whitney was no longer my teacher, I didn't see her very often—only sometimes at lunchtime in the library. It was strange not to be in her class.

Without Mrs. Whitney there, English class was a chore. The nun, Sister Maria, would drone on and make us copy her notes. Her fat face grew redder and redder as she spoke. She also wore a pink sari, but all of her pleats were perfectly pressed in, as if she took an iron to her sari after she tucked her pleats in her waistband. Her sari blouse had sweat stains under her arms, ripples of different shades of yellow-pink and brown-pink.

“William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in England. William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in England. He wrote over thirty plays before he died in 1616. He wrote over thirty plays before he died in 1616. He also wrote sonnets. He also wrote sonnets. A sonnet is—are you copying this? No daydreaming! A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem...”

In late October, when we were learning calculus in math and taxes in accounting, I spent much of my time in the library looking at the shelves. On one of the days that month, I picked up an anthology of short stories and went to check it out.

“Asha!”

I looked behind me. Mrs. Whitney leaned against one of the shelves. Her hair was loose as usual, but she was wearing a button-down shirt and jeans.

“Hello, Mrs. Whitney. How are your classes?”

“They’re going well. How are yours?”

“Okay. Boring, actually. I haven’t been going much. English is horrible.”

“You’ll do fine.”

“Why are you wearing jeans?” I blurted out before I could think. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“That’s fine. I wasn’t completely honest when I said my classes are going well. The classes *are* going well, but I’m leaving.”

In the middle of the year? Couldn’t she even finish? “Oh. You must have gotten a better job, then?” I hoped so. I couldn’t imagine why she would just leave, after all she had done for the college and the library. I thought she had enjoyed it, that she would stay.

“Not exactly.” She hesitated a moment, then walked back behind the shelf.

“Are you moving back to California?”

“No.”

I followed her, waiting. The shelf we stood behind had great big map books on it.

“I’ll be teaching 7<sup>th</sup> standard at the American Boys School next year. It starts next August, as they do in the US. I think I’ll like it.”

“I thought you said you wanted to teach at an Indian school.”

“I did. But this should be fun, too.”

“But it’s October now. Why not finish the year and go to your new job next August?”

“I know it’s October.”

“What? You didn’t—I mean, congratulations.”

“I enjoyed working with all of you.”

She hadn’t answered my question. I wanted to respect Mrs. Whitney’s choice not to tell me what happened, but this was all so strange! The college must have fired Mrs. Whitney, or asked her to leave quietly. If it was her disrespect of the curriculum, they knew that before—they would have done it after the previous year was over, not waited. And as I remembered, everyone did quite well on their English exams.

“I’m just here today to get the few things I left behind. I hope you have a good year, Asha.”

“I hope you enjoy your new job.”

“I think I will.”

She left me standing behind that shelf, in the map section, holding a book of stories in the crook of my arm.

In the following months, I began to feel as uncomfortable in school as I was at home. Even the library didn't seem the place it once was. Throughout the year, it began to fall apart. The curtains frayed, and Sister Mary Catherine took them down so the pink bars would show. Paint chipped off the wall—the same paint that I had brushed on so carefully, making sure not to drip on my clothes. The whole place seemed darker. Instead of sitting in the library, I started to sit outside more often, watching all the girls walking around, laughing and joking with each other.

I continued reading all year, learning about art and literature from the Internet, exploring the workings of the human mind in all kinds of books, but none of it answered the questions I was struggling with, no matter how hard I looked or how much I read.

**Chapter 3: “Our Happiness is in Our Control”**

“Asha,” said my mother one Tuesday in March, before my exams and just after my eighteenth birthday. “I have a boy coming over for you this evening, for tea.” We were on the sofa, I with my economics textbook and she embroidering a placemat.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It’s time. You’re almost finished with 12<sup>th</sup>.”

“I’m not ready to get married yet.” I closed the textbook in my lap

She continued with the needle, through the cloth sideways and out in a stem stitch. It was a flower, I think. “Just meet him. He’s come in from the U.S. for three weeks. He works with computers and is doing quite well.”

“I want to get to know the boy I have to marry.”

“If you like him, I promise we’ll be able to meet him two or three times before you have to decide.”

That wasn’t what I had meant. Two or three times, in one week, with the same two families hovering over us. “I’m only eighteen! Just give me another year before we start this.”

“These things take time. Think of your sister before you start this nonsense. She can’t get married before you do. Are you ready to jeopardize her future because you want to dilly-dally around?”

I thought about how nice it would have been for me to have an older sister. An older, ugly sister, whom no one would marry. She would try and try, be twenty-seven before finally she found someone, and by then I would be twenty-four and no one would blame me. “Poor girl, it’s not her fault that it was so hard to get her sister married,” they

would say. Or what if she was not ugly but was determined to study and to work, and no one wanted to marry her for it. She could have been beautiful, like Tara, and keep saying to the boys, “I want to work, and I want to study. I have no time for children.” My parents would only give up on her by twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and by then I would be old enough to want to get married. Old enough to have learned what I wanted to learn. This sister of mine, this older one, would whisper to me, “Asha, I gave you all the time I could.” Then, at my wedding, I could thank her for her gift to me, this sister of mine, beautiful like Tara and unmarried still.

“No,” I said. “I don’t want to jeopardize her future.”

“Good. Then I want you to wear something nice, and put some makeup on. Put on your black *salwar kurti* with the sequins, or the yellow one with the thread embroidery. Put on some lipstick.”

“Mama, I hate makeup.”

“*Beti*, come on, please,” she said calmly. “This will not be so bad. You’ll see.”

I wanted to believe her.

“I was scared too when I started looking. I didn’t think I’d find someone as nice as your papa, but I did, didn’t I?” Her fingers were slowly moving with the needle, in and out of these perfectly measured stitches. I wasn’t even sure that she was looking at her fingers moving—they just knew where to go, could feel their place on the cloth.

They moved independently, and yet they stitched exactly as she wanted them to.

“But if I don’t know the boy, how can I know he’s nice?”

“It’s a leap of faith you must make,” she said. “Trust that God would not send you someone who is bad for you.”

“How can I marry someone I don’t love?”

“Marriage is a chance, but it also takes work. You’ll grow to love whoever it is you marry, whatever sort of a man he is.” She paused, looked down at the finished stem, and switched thread to a pale red—almost pink. She poked the thread through the eye of the needle on the first try, as if that needle’s eye were three times its size. “Men aren’t strong like we are. It’s our job to make a marriage work, and it’s our failing if it doesn’t work. Our happiness is in our control.”

“Did you love Papa the first time you saw him?”

“Of course not. I didn’t know him. But you see, we love each other now. If I hadn’t married him then because I didn’t already love him, think of how I might have ended up. Without you and your sister and your brother, without this home. I had faith in God, and God took care of me.”

My mother was young! I had never seen it before. It had always seemed so old to be thirty-anything, but these hands were without wrinkles and her face looked just like mine. All this wisdom wasn’t her wisdom at all—it was borrowed from her mother, and her mother borrowed it from hers. She was *young*; I couldn’t believe it. But there it was, in front of me sewing steadily, all her youth.

“Mama.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll meet him. That’s all I can promise.”

“That’s all I want you to promise.”



I got dressed quickly—wore the yellow *salwar* with the thread embroidery—and put on lipstick. I chose a brownish-pink color, and the lipstick felt like leftover food that I had to remember not to lick off. I also reminded myself not to touch my eyes, since I put eyeliner on and didn't want to smear it.

When I came downstairs, my whole family was sitting in the den. Everyone was quiet. Tara was dressed in a pale pink *churidar kurta*, and Mama made Manish wear slacks and a button-down shirt.

"They'll be here soon," said Mama. "Tara, Asha, start the tea."

We went in the kitchen, opened the packets of *dhoklas*, *mithai*, and mini-*kachoris* Mama had bought from Shree Mithai. Tara started the tea. I was careful not to spill anything on myself.

"I can't wait for your wedding!" Tara said. "I've been thinking about songs to dance to at the wedding, and I'm having so much trouble choosing! I think I'll make Manish dance with me, and maybe we'll do a duet, but I won't let him sing because he's so horrible—"

"Please. This boy might be an idiot."

"Mama says he's supposed to be cute."

"Mama thinks everyone from a good family is cute."

"She's never going to let you go to college, even if you don't get married."

"I never said anything about college."

"No, but it's so obvious."

Tara was right. College was why I was putting this off. I wasn't ready to get married yet because I didn't want to give up all of the things I was learning. And when I

did get married, I wanted it to be someone like Mr. Darcy from the book, someone who was perfect for me and whom I fell in love with first, before marrying him.

“Okay fine. But we’ll see. Maybe I can convince Mama to let me go.”

The doorbell rang.

“I hope he’s cute,” said Tara, “Like a movie hero.”

My mother came to the doorway to the kitchen. “Tara, you finish. Asha, come.”

She pulled me toward the door. “Now, be nice,” she said. Again with the niceness! Wasn’t I always nice, polite, ladylike? Did I ever once embarrass my parents?

We opened the door. A woman in too much makeup and a black and gold sari walked in, followed by her bald husband. The boy came in last. He looked at me quickly, then looked away. I had to admit that he was handsome. Fair, tall, with a certain roughness about him not often found in Indian men. He looked like he could climb the Himalayas and say when he was finished, “It was easy. Just put one foot after the other.”

“Hello,” said my mother. “Welcome. Come on in and have a seat. My younger daughter is fixing tea. This is Asha.” She pulled me forward, and the woman in the black and gold sari looked at me for a long time. “And this is my son, Manish.”

“This is Amit,” the woman said, pointing to her son and looking at me.

We walked to the den and sat down.

“How was your trip?” Mama asked the woman.

“It’s a short train ride from Madras. Quite comfortable.”

“Ah.”

We sat for a moment, and the woman said, “Your mama tells me you’re still in school. Are you in 12<sup>th</sup> standard, then?”

“Yes, Aunty. My exams are soon. I’m on study holidays.”

She turned to Manish. “And *beta*,” she said slowly, as if she were talking to a baby, “What standard are you in?”

“Eighth, Aunty.”

“How was your trip from the U.S.?” I asked Amit.

“It was long,” he said. “I just came in yesterday.”

“This is a beautiful house,” said the woman.

“Thank you so much,” said Mama.

“Do you still have jet lag from the trip?” I asked Amit.

“Yeah. I do. I was awake all night and slept on the whole train ride over here.”

He relaxed a little and smiled.

“Asha, I can’t carry all this!” Tara yelled from the kitchen. “Come help me!”

“Excuse me. Aunty, Uncle.” I stood up and went to the kitchen, relieved to be out of there.

Tara had put all of the teacups, the chutney bowls, the snacks, and the silverware on one giant tray. Everything was well-organized, balanced on the tray. I picked the whole tray up easily.

“What’s the problem?”

“The problem?” Tara looked at me. “No problem.”

“What?”

“I looked in. Mama was right. He’s *so* cute. You’re going to get married and have the *cutest* babies.”

“You called me all the way in here to say that?”

“That, and to tell you that you looked like you had to go shit.”

“Thanks.”

She picked up teacups and bowls, split everything between two smaller trays, and pushed one of them at me. “Here. Carry this.”

We each walked in with one tray and set them down. I picked up a cup and a saucer. “Uncle,” I said, and handed him a cup.

“Thank you,” he said.

Tara had already given one to Amit’s mother, and she nudged me as I passed her. “I saved him for you,” she whispered through her teeth.

“Your tea,” I said to Amit as I handed him a cup.

“Thank you.” But he wasn’t looking at me when he said it. His eyes were across the room, following Tara.

When we finished passing around the tea, the plates, and the snacks, we both sat down.

“And *beti*,” said the woman to Tara, “what standard are you in?”

“I’m in tenth, Aunty.”

“Tenth exams are very important ones.”

“I’ve been studying like *crazy*,” she said, “and I’ll be so happy when they’re over! I’m so tired of wearing a uniform to school. When I start 11<sup>th</sup>, I’ll go where Asha goes, and they don’t have to wear uniforms at all. I can wear whatever I want.”

Mama was staring at Tara, trying to get her to stop talking.

Amit said to Tara, “What subjects are you going to take in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Probably commerce, but I *hate* math! Maybe Asha can teach me, though, because she’s so good at it.” She looked over at me.

“Why do you hate math?” he asked.

“Oh, all those crazy triangle things and the formulas, the right angles and the Pythagorean Theorem. I’m horrible at algebra, and who can remember that x-equals-negative-b-square-root-of-something formula?”

“Easy,” he said. “It’s the quadratic formula.  $X$  equals negative  $b$  plus or minus square root  $b$  squared minus  $4$  into  $a$  by  $2a$ . I learned it as a song in school.”

“I can’t believe you remember that!” Tara said.

I couldn’t believe that he was flirting with my sister in front of me.

“I do remember it.”

“I just learned that formula in school,” Manish piped in.

“Why are you interested in studying commerce?” Amit asked Tara.

“Oh I don’t know,” she said. “Asha did commerce, and she liked it.”

“But what do *you* like about it?”

“Well, it’ll teach me lots of practical skills, like how to handle money and how to run a household. Asha’s practical. I’d like to grow up to be like her.”

The conversation continued on—Amit trying to learn about Tara, Tara trying to divert the conversation toward me, Mama staring at both of them, the men watching. I kept quiet.

When they finished their tea and we had passed around the remaining snacks, I asked everyone if I could bring them anything else. “Water? Pepsi? Anything?”

“No, thank you,” said Amit’s mother.

I stood up and put everyone’s empty cups, saucers, and plates on the two trays. Tara got up to help me, and we carried the trays into the kitchen.

“I tried,” she whispered to me.

“I know.”

My sister could not help but be charming. And she was more beautiful than anyone I knew, more beautiful even than the models on the cover of *Femina*. It was no wonder a boy would look first at her, at all of that fair, tall, naïve beauty—those legs of hers, that sharp-featured face, her constant and endless energy, those long, thin fingers.

The next day, Amit’s father came to the house around two in the afternoon. The servant had not yet left, and she made tea for him. He talked to Papa in Papa’s study. Mama stayed in the kitchen and told all of us kids not to bother them.

Papa’s study was a tiny room with a single desk and two wooden folding chairs. After Amit’s father went in and shut the door, Tara, Manish, and I went right up to the door.

“Manish,” I whispered. “They’ll notice this many people out here. Go play Mario to create noise.”

“But I want to hear,” he said softly.

“We’ll tell you as soon as we know,” said Tara. “We need your help. Come on.”

“You’ll tell me as soon as you find out?”

“Immediately,” I said.

He went into the next room and turned on the Nintendo. It was too soft, so I walked in the room. “Increase the volume.”

“Okay.” The high-pitched dee-dee-deet-dee-dee-deet got louder and began to echo.

“Perfect,” I said, and went back.

Tara was at the door. “I can’t hear anything,” she said. “Manish’s volume is too high.”

“You go turn it down,” I said, and she went.

I couldn’t hear anything more than low and muffled sounds. I could tell when Papa was speaking and when the other man was, but none of the words came through. Manish’s volume went down a little, but I still couldn’t hear anything. My parents had always promised that I could make the final decision, and on Amit my final decision would be no. Anyone so disrespectful toward me would *not* be given the privilege of marrying me. He would be staring at Tara for our whole marriage.

Tara was back, listening too. The voices got louder, but the noise still didn’t sound like words. Manish came out from the room. “What are they saying?”

“Manish, go back in,” said Tara. “They’ll hear us. Look—your Mario just died.” The distinctive death music from the game rang out loudly. “Go back and play another game. We’ll tell you.”

“We need to open the door a little,” said Tara.

“No. Papa will know. The room’s too small.”

“We can do it quietly.”

The voices rose a little. “Listen,” I said.

The words became a little louder and almost distinct. The knob of the door turned from the inside, but the door didn’t open yet. Papa was giving us time to get out of the way.

Tara and I looked at the knob and ran, perhaps a bit too loudly. We stood behind the open door of the room Manish was playing in. We could hear through a small crack but didn’t dare look. “Keep playing,” I whispered loudly.

“...for coming,” said Papa’s voice.

“Thank you for listening to me,” the man said. “Are you sure about your decision?”

“Absolutely sure.”

“Think about what you’re giving up.”

“I know exactly what I’m giving up.”

“Amit has an excellent job. He’s very well-off, especially for his age.”

“I know he is.”

“I’m leaving.”

“Go, then.”

“Goodbye.”

“It was very nice meeting you.”

“It was very nice meeting you, too.”

What an odd conversation! I couldn’t make sense of any of it. They were being polite, but not nice to each other at all. Papa actually sounded angry, and Papa never got angry about anything.



“I’m going to go find out what happened,” I said. “Both of you, stay here. Play Mario.”

Downstairs, Papa went into the kitchen and told the servant to take a break. Since the kitchen had a doorway but no door, I stood beside it flat against the wall. My parents spoke in Sindhi.

“So?” asked Mama.

“He left. I told him to leave.”

“Why? What happened?”

“He said that Amit liked Tara and wanted her. He said Amit would wait until Tara finished school and marry her then.”

“That’s a good thing. Why did you tell him to leave?”

“They came here for Asha,” he said, switching to English. “If my eldest daughter is not good enough for him, then he can’t have either of them.”

“But he wanted Tara! He was going to wait for her. Think how easy that would be for us.”

“I don’t care how easy it would be. Such a disrespectful boy will not marry any child of mine. I won’t allow it.”

I heard shuffling, and Mama mumbled something.

“Asha,” Papa said. “Come in.”

I thought I had hidden myself well enough. How did he know I was there? I rounded the corner and walked in. “How—”

“Your shadow,” he said. “How much did you hear?”

“All.”

“Good. You need to know. I’ll tell Tara, too, because she should know. I’m going up.” He walked out of the kitchen, leaving me and Mama alone in there.

“It’s not your fault,” said Mama as she took my hand, “that your sister is so beautiful. We’ll find someone for you.”

There was something familiar about the things Mama had said the previous day. *Marriage is a chance*, she said. *Our happiness is in our control*. I sat and thought about it, how contradictory these things sounded, how Mama was so unsure of herself even though she thought she was sure. I couldn’t figure out why it felt familiar. And then I remembered the first book I got from Mrs. Whitney, *Pride and Prejudice*, the only book she actually gave me and didn’t lend. “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance,” someone had said. But who said it, and why? It wasn’t the mother. But it sounded so familiar.

I scoured the book that day and couldn’t find it anywhere. But I was sure it was in there somewhere, hiding, waiting for me to find it. Who had said it? It was as much a mystery, and just as frustrating as not knowing why Mrs. Whitney left so suddenly. They were both things that should be easy—“Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance,” she said, but who was *she*? It was a she.

I felt powerless again, powerless to know things that I felt I should know, had a right to know. I flipped pages upon pages, went down each page with my finger looking for the words, but couldn’t see them anywhere. They *had* to be there! I nearly tore the book apart trying to find them. “Happiness in marriage,” “Happiness is chance,” “Our happiness is in our control,” the phrases repeated themselves, took on new combinations

in my head, became a many-headed monster that I could only see as words branching off others. “Chance is marriage.” “Marriage is control.”

*Our happiness is in our control.* It had a new meaning—my mother had meant our happiness in marriage, but if marriage was chance, it could not be controlled. The only control I had was separate from chance, was not luck at all. My only power was the knowledge of my own power.

I ran downstairs to the den, where my mother sat watching a Hindi serial. Her legs were curled under her, her hands one on top of the other on her lap. I went to the television, turned it off, and faced her.

“Mama,” I said.

“Yes?”

“I want to go to college.”

“We’re getting you married. I don’t want you forgetting your duty to this family, to your sister—”

“I’ll say no to every man I meet if I can’t go to college.”

“Stop this stupidity, Asha.”

“I will do it. Let me go to college, and I’ll get married without fighting each time.”

“Your husband will never consent to you finishing while you’re married to him.”

“Fine, then. I’ll take it up with him.”

“What has possessed you? What is all of this about? Is it that Amit didn’t want—”

“I don’t care about Amit. Fine, he didn’t want me. That’s fine with me. We all know Tara’s the beautiful one, but I always knew that—it’s no shock.”

“Then what is this?”

“If I meet twenty such men before the person who’s going to be my husband, or fifty such men, I could be in college for a whole year while I’m searching. Maybe two. You yourself said that these things take time. Just let me do something while I’m looking.”

“Don’t order me around. Your papa and I haven’t raised you to disrespect your elders like—”

“Mama, I don’t care how you think I’ve been raised. I’m ungrateful, selfish, disrespectful, whatever. But you can’t change it. Let me go to college.”

She looked at me strangely and shifted her legs out from under her. “But you can’t...girls who don’t need to work for a living don’t need to go to college.”

“I don’t *need* to. I *want* to.”

“*Beti*, what is it that you can’t get from home? I’ll teach you how to cook, to sew, everything.”

“I’ll learn them in the evenings. I want to go to college.”

“No man will want you if you’re in college.”

“No man will want me if I say no to every man I meet.” I smiled confidently, wondering myself what it was that had possessed me.

“Ask your father.”

“Don’t bring Papa into this.”

“He’s the head of this family,” she said. “This is his decision.”

“You say yes, and he will. You know that.”

“But—”

“Yes or no, Mama? I’ll get married as soon as I find someone suitable, but only if you let me go to college. You have my promise.”

“What if Papa says no?”

“I’ll deal with Papa if he says no. What do *you* say?”

She shook her head a little and jerked her hands up in some sort of disbelief.

“You’ve given me no choice.”

“Is that yes?”

“Yes,” she said, but it was somewhere between a question and an answer.

“Good,” I said. “I’ll tell Papa.”

“What if he disapproves?”

“He won’t.” And if he did, I would bargain with him as necessary.

I knocked on the closed door of Papa’s study. “Can I come in?” I asked, through the door.

Papa opened the door. “Come. Sit down.”

“Did you talk to Tara?” I asked.

“Yes, I did.”

I shuffled a little in the wooden folding chair, an antique from my Dada’s shop in the 1920’s, passed down to Papa. Presumably, Manish would get the chairs when he grew up and got married—a small thing from father to son, but with value beyond the wood and craftsmanship. I shifted my weight to get comfortable in it.

“I asked Mama, and she told me I could go to college if I continued to look for a husband.”

Papa frowned at me. “She has been quite adamant that you girls shouldn’t go to college. Is this something to do with what happened yesterday?”

“In a way. Mama says it’s okay if I start college. I’d like to have your permission.”

“Why—why would—what happened?”

“I told Mama how much I wanted it, and she said it was okay.”

“But, it doesn’t make sense.”

“If Mama says it’s okay, can I have your permission? I’ll go to a local college. It won’t be very expensive, and you’ll be saving some money once Tara switches schools. I’d be happy to take less spending money if—”

“Money is no problem,” he said.

“I’ll be very responsible. I’ll get excellent marks and I’ll learn all the cooking-cleaning things at home in the evenings.”

“Asha, be honest with me. What did you tell your mother?”

Papa was surprising me more and more that day. Tara was good at seeing what was hidden, but Papa—he had always seemed so oblivious. It occurred to me that he would have known I was lying about the play from the moment I described it.

“I told her that I wanted to go to college.”

“What else, Asha?” He spoke calmly, as if he could wait a year for the answer. His hands were still, sitting on the desk.

“I said I would only get married if I was allowed to go to college.”

He paused a long time, then said, “It’s very wrong to manipulate in this way.”

“It’s my life. I want to go to college. *Please* let me. I promise I’ll get married.”

“I have no problem with your going to college. That’s not my worry at all.”

“Then? I don’t understand.”

“I’m disappointed in the way you have handled this situation, Asha. We haven’t taught you to act this way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you aren’t sorry. Just be careful. Have you agreed to marry the first man Mama wants for you?”

“No.”

“Good. I want you to be very careful in choosing. Marriage is not to be taken lightly.”

“If I don’t go to college now, I never will.”

“You’ve made your decision,” he said. “What do you want to study?”

“I want to do Psychology and English Literature.”

“Not commerce.”

“Papa, I hate commerce.”

“This is your choice. I will respect that choice. Just be careful, okay?”

“Okay.”

I didn’t know why he was warning me like this, as if something bad would happen at college. If he didn’t disapprove of college, then what was the problem? My behavior to Mama was one thing to be disappointed about, but why all this fear about the future?

At that time I was baffled by his reaction. I thought he was overreacting. I couldn't see any foresight in it, any knowledge of what it means to lock ourselves into agreements that we can't escape.

After talking to Mama and Papa, I felt like getting up and running across Bangalore. I wanted to do anything but sit still. I ran into Tara's room, and found her and Manish playing cards on the bed.

"We're playing Speed," said Manish, without losing a moment's concentration. The two of them frantically picked up cards and put them down on the two open-faced piles in front of them.

"Flip?" said Tara.

"Flip. One, two, *three*." They slapped down cards frantically.

"Flip?" said Manish.

"Flip. One, two—" Tara flipped her card on two. "Three." But by three, she was already putting cards of hers down on the pile.

"No fair!" said Manish. "Asha, did you see? She cheated."

"I did *not* cheat, you idiot. Asha, you saw. Did I cheat?"

He threw his cards down on the bed, scattering them all over. "You cheated," he said. "I don't play cards with cheaters."

"I did not cheat."

"Cheaters never prosper," he said dramatically and stormed out of the room.

Tara went running after him. "Come back!" she said from another room, and I could hear their quick and clunky footsteps moving all over the house.



“Children!” I heard Mama say. “Stop running!”

Someone was on the terrace of the house next to ours—a servant in an old green sari. She poured, little by little, the water from a bright red bucket. She crouched low with her broom, a bundle of thin sticks tied together with twine, and swept sideways, brushing the water and the dirt into the drain. I got up and opened the window. I could hear the even *ssssh ssssh*, *ssssh ssssh* of her broom as she went back and forth, back and forth. Such an even hand she had, each stroke the same volume, the same length. Then, finally, a long stroke dragged across the terrace, a final swish of water into the drain. She turned the faucet to refill the bucket, and after it filled, she poured it out again. *Ssssh ssssh*, she began again.

Tara came running in the room, out of breath.

“I did *not* cheat,” she said, facing me.

“Of course you did. I saw.”

“Okay, a little. But Manish is so *easy* to cheat with!”

“That’s not a reason. Where is he?”

“He’s watching TV.” She plopped down and leaned against the headboard, legs outstretched.

“Did Papa talk to you?” I asked her, sitting down next to her.

“Yes, he did. Amit was so stupid to think I’d marry him! What stupidity, to come for my sister and then ask for me instead.”

“You’re the prettier one,” I said. “Of course he’d ask for you.”

“Stop being an idiot. Just because you’re darker than me doesn’t mean I’m prettier. I’ll kick you if you say that again.” She kicked her right leg in front of her as a threat. “Anyway, he wasn’t cute at all.”

“You thought he was.”

“Okay, he isn’t anymore. You’ll find someone much cuter. And I still want to dance at your wedding. I want a purple *lehnga*. Think how many boys will be there. Maybe I’ll wear a sari to the reception and pretend I’m older, and—”

“Tara, stop it. I’m not getting married yet.”

“I’m so *tired* of studying. It’s so boring.”

“You haven’t been studying. You’ve been cheating at cards with Manish. And if you stop talking for a second, I have news.”

“What news?” She stopped bouncing.

“Mama’s going to let me go to college.”

“How?” She stared at me like I had just turned into a cow. “How did you do that?”

“I told her I wouldn’t get married otherwise.”

Tara stayed perfectly still. The woman outside with the broom was gone, and all I could hear was a dog barking somewhere and a bus horn from far away. “That was clever,” Tara said.

“It was, right?”

“I always thought you were too nice to blackmail anyone.”

Blackmail? It wasn't blackmail. I was only making choices for myself. "I'm not *blackmailing* Mama. It's just a deal I made with her. I'll get married as soon as I find someone I like, but I get to go to college until then."

"Whatever. But it's okay. I mean, you get to go to college. I'd love to go to college! It would be such fun."

"It's not blackmail."

"I don't care if it is," she said. "But you want something—college—and you got Mama to give it to you by threatening not to do something she wants. It's not wrong or anything, but it's still blackmail."

"Okay, fine. Maybe a little."

I had to admit, she did have a point. Blackmail. But the thing was done, and I was sure that it was done for the best. I would go to college. I would meet others who felt just like I did about reading and learning. I would have teachers like Mrs. Whitney who challenged me and gave me knowledge. I wouldn't have to hide anything, because it would all be known. "I'm studying" would not be a lie; it would come to mean "I'm doing what I want."

**Chapter 4: “Where is the Mind?”**

I met two more boys before college started, and each just as bad as Amit in his own way. Mama and Papa met many others, but they never got far enough with the boys to invite them home—their status, their looks, something was wrong with each. One of the two boys who came home said, just like that, “I decided to get married because I’m tired of cooking and cleaning for myself.” His name was Anup or Anil or something like that. The other one was named Ram, and he had no direction in life, no degree, no career, nothing. How he thought he could provide for a family I don’t know. Papa said no to both before I had to give my opinion.

I looked all around Bangalore at different colleges, and I decided to go to college near where I had gone for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>—I would be able to keep an eye on Tara, and I could stop in at the old library if I wanted to. Since Tara would be a student, I could make her check out books for me. I had heard about the Western influence in my new college, in the way they taught, and I decided to take the risk of going and seeing. In my new college, the buildings were newer and brighter. I imagined the lively discussions that must be taking place; philosophy and literature, history, psychology. They even had western-style toilets and clean, light-orange tile all over. And they weren’t Catholic, so no nuns as teachers. No Sister Maria with her fat face and her pleated sari. I imagined a whole college full of Indian Mrs. Whitneys.

That first day, that rainy day in July when the whole city smelled like dirt and pollution, Tara and I took an auto rickshaw together. Tara was so excited that she had the auto waiting for us early. “Come, come, come,” she said quickly, dragging me in. My socks and pant legs were completely wet by the time I got in.

“I’m so excited I’m allowed to wear jeans! No more uniforms. Only jeans from today,” she said as we began to move. “Come meet me for lunch. Let’s bunk classes.”

“Tara! Are you crazy? It’s the first day. And anyway, I *want* to be in college. I *want* to go to class.”

“I can’t believe you convinced Mama.”

“Well, I did.”

“You’re going to get married before you finish,” she said.

“I know. It’s okay.”

For as long as I could put it off, I would try. But Tara started me on thinking about it, and I couldn’t stop. The auto bumped along and Tara kept talking—about jeans, about girls, about boys, about marriage—but I stopped listening. Everything was dark outside, and it seemed a horrible day to begin college.

The auto dropped me off first, and then took Tara the rest of the way. When I walked in through the gate, I remembered why I chose this place—the trees. Trees lined the path on both sides for the longest time, forming so many good, shady places I would be able to read during lunch. The rain poured down on the sides of the trees; it was like a row of green umbrellas.

I went into the class building, in awe of how clean it was, even as all the girls dragged in rain and dirt. The walls in the hallway had artwork on them, and there were windows all around. Even the classroom was nice—there were chairs with small desks attached to them instead of benches, so each girl had her own desk, like a classroom from an American movie.

“Good morning, girls. I am Anu Kalra.”

“Good morning, Ma’am!” we rang out in chorus.

The woman in front of the classroom was a young, fair North-Indian woman with short hair. She wore a pink sari, but not the sickly pink that nuns wear—a bright, light pink, like one-rupee pieces of chewing gum.

“Welcome to psychology. Let us begin by defining psychology.”

Girls flipped frantically through their textbooks, looking for the definition of the word.

“There’s a whole chapter in there that defines it—you won’t find a single definition in the book.”

The girls stopped flipping and looked up.

“Psychology is the study of the human mind. Where is the mind?”

A very dark girl in purple raised her hand. When called upon, she said, “Your mind is your brain.”

“Is it?” asked Anu Kalra. “The Japanese used to believe that it is in your stomach.”

Laughter bounced off the white walls.

“Psychology is also the study of the brain. But mind and brain may be separate. Or they may be the same thing. But perhaps that’s a question for the philosophers.”

I couldn’t understand. The same but separate? This was more than confusing.

“Psychology is the study of human behaviour as well.”

These were all the same thing! It was crazy! But as she explained, I began to understand a bit. The mind is where we think, which might or might not be the brain. Behaviour is what we choose to do with our thoughts. Sociology, we learned, is the

study of groups. Anthropology is the study of whole cultures. I had seen these names on the journals in the old college library, and I had even read articles from all these journals, but I had never stopped to think—what are these subjects? What do they mean? Why do people study them?

My next class was Hindi, and Hindi was much the same as the previous year. I knew it would be easy, though, and it was the only boring class each day.

In English class, we were told that we would have to write papers with our opinions about what we were reading, but with using quotations. I knew how difficult this would be. All I ever did before was memorize and repeat, or read for fun and think about it on my own. I didn't know how to do both repeating and thinking at the same time. But we had to do it, the teacher announced. The English teacher's name was Mrs. Shekhar, and she said, "Girls, I expect only the best effort from you."

I was disappointed that Mrs. Whitney wasn't there—somehow I wished she would magically be teaching at the college—but for a day of Indian teachers, it wasn't so bad. The sun came out just before I left, shining through the trees, covering the path with broad stripes of light.

"Classes are so *boring*," Tara said when we met at the gate of my college that afternoon. The rain had cleared since morning; we stood in the shade of the wall. "I wanted to bunk, but no one would bunk with me."

"Tara, you shouldn't be bunking. It was the first day!"

She rolled her eyes and turned toward the road, but the auto coming through had people in it already. "You are *such* a nerd. Let's go to a movie tomorrow."

“Tara, I won’t bunk. I like my classes. You shouldn’t bunk either.”

“I won’t miss anything,” she said. “All they do is read from the textbook. How can I learn math if they’re just reading from the book? Or that horrible accounting? Yuck. Let’s go shopping tomorrow. Or let’s see *Titanic* again.”

“You’ve already seen it fifty times.”

“Only seven. Stop exaggerating.”

We found an auto and went home. Tara talked on about all the girls she had met, the ten Seemas in her class, the NRIs and the locals, the girls who had boyfriends and the girls who didn’t.

At home, Mama and Papa were nowhere to be found, and Manish was not home yet. Tara and I began to make tea for ourselves, but we heard the door shut and followed the footsteps upstairs. The master bedroom door was opened just a crack, and there were noises from behind it.

I put my finger to my mouth, and Tara and I quietly moved toward the crack in the door to listen.

“You can’t keep doing this,” said Mama’s voice.

“I will *not* have my daughter marry that boy.”

“If you keep saying no before they even come home, how will she even have a chance?”

“There is no hurry. She’s still young.”

“How can you say that?” Mama’s voice was becoming higher. “She’s eighteen!”

“Think of all the other girls, getting married at twenty-two, twenty-four. Girls these days wait. Even in our generation some of them waited.”



“People know we’re looking. What will they say? I’ll tell you what they’ll say. They’ll say ‘there’s something wrong with this girl’ and then no one will marry her. They’ll say ‘there’s something wrong with this family,’ and then no one will marry Tara. Do you want two daughters that no one will touch?”

“You’re being unreasonable. We’ve only been looking for—”

“Unreasonable! You’re calling me unreasonable? It’s you who is responsible for all this nonsense, these girls wanting to go to college. Soon they’ll want to work and go off and date who knows what boys.”

“Don’t interrupt me.”

“I’ll interrupt if I want to interrupt. This is *my* home. You go to work and make money, and *I* raise the children, not you.”

“I’m their father.”

“Where were you all these years? Traveling. Off somewhere.”

“Working. Making money so you all can eat.”

The voices were both getting louder. I had never heard my parents arguing before, and from the way Tara looked, she hadn’t either. Tara tried to move closer, and I put my arm out to stop her. “Papa will notice your shadow,” I whispered in her ear.

“If you’re unhappy with the way I raised them, you should have been home more.”

“If I had been home more, we would have starved. We wouldn’t have this house. We wouldn’t have this jewelry you’re wearing. And you—the wife of a poor shopkeeper? Would you have been happy with that?”

“You’re twisting my words.”

“I’m not twisting anything. Would you have been happy? No. You would have said ‘you should be working harder.’ You would have said ‘we have two daughters to marry off.’”

“Asha is eighteen. If we wait, she won’t be moldable. She won’t fit in with her in-laws. How is her mother-in-law to shape her if she’s already twenty-five and disobedient and set in her ways? Tell me.”

“If she marries the wrong man? Then what?”

It was a strange feeling, waiting to hear what my parents would decide for me. I wished I could jump into the room and say my own opinion, but I stood outside quietly, listening.

“After all this college nonsense, I don’t know who would want to marry her. Literature? Psychology? What is this? Who will want such a girl? Soon she’ll be saying she wants a master’s degree.”

“We should be proud to have educated girls.”

“Are you crazy?” Mama was shrieking now.

“You’re calling your husband crazy. What is all of this about obedience? You yourself are not moldable.”

“This is different. I’ve lived with you nineteen years. I lived with your mother for five years, put up with her day after day, in the kitchen, telling me what to do, making me clean the bathrooms, not allowing us to go out. I took care of her while you were gone. Even in her last days, who took care of her? I. I’ve been obedient. I’ve paid what I have to pay. I have *earned* the right to make the decisions for this family.”

Papa must have been very upset, because he didn't say anything back. I pulled Tara's arm, and we went quietly to her room. We heard a door slam, and then another.

After that, boys and their families started coming home more often.

Papa said no to all of the boys who came home until Vikram. Some didn't come back and ask for me at all, so Papa didn't have to decide on them. They were mostly horrible—dark-skinned and socially awkward, or cute but arrogant, or smart but without ambition. But Vikram was good-looking, friendly, hard-working, well-off, everything that a girl could want in a husband. Mama and Papa were both happy.

He came on a Sunday afternoon, for tea of course, with his parents. Tea was the perfect time, because they could stay long but not too long. Mama had asked the servant to stay late that day to serve us.

The bell rang, and we all went to the door.

"Welcome," said Mama, as they walked in. Before I even noticed Vikram, I noticed his mother. She was beautiful. She had long, thick hair with only a few strands of grey. She smiled warmly and took my hand in both of hers. "You must be Asha. It's wonderful to see you finally."

Vikram smiled too, a little nervously, and said, "It's nice to meet you, Asha."

His father was a handsome man, slim with grey hair, and looked like an older version of Vikram. We all went to the den, and Mama and Vikram's mother talked. Vikram looked at me, then rolled his eyes over to the two mothers, who were talking about the mosquito netting on the window. The look was that of a co-conspirator, someone else saying, "Isn't this awkward?"

“Asha, your parents said you’re still studying,” he said. “What subjects?”

“English and psychology.”

“That sounds interesting. When I was at NYU, I enjoyed my psychology classes.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I took intro and abnormal. We learned about all sorts of interesting stuff. I didn’t really like my lit classes very much, but some people love that stuff.”

He didn’t criticize me at all! No “I can’t believe you want to study *that*.” No “You’re in college? How *nice*.”

“What made you decide to come back to India?”

He looked at his father. “I came back to help with the family business. My brothers have locations of the shop, too, and Papa has just opened a new one for me to manage.”

“When did you come back?”

“A year ago. It’s good to be back in India.”

The servant came in and set the tea and biscuits on the table. I stood and offered the tea to each person, then biscuits. Vikram’s mother and father were both smiling, and both said “thank you.” Mama and Papa seemed pretty happy, too. Vikram took the tea from me and looked directly into my eyes. Tara and Manish stared at the wall, so bored that they might fall asleep at any moment.

The adults started talking to each other again, Mama and Vikram’s mother about the house, Papa and Vikram’s father about business. Because of the noise, Tara and

Manish began talking to each other, too. Vikram stayed silent across the room and I stayed silent on my side.

“All my sons stay at home,” I heard Vikram’s mother say.

“The boys have been loyal to the business,” I heard his father say.

“You’re so *mean*,” I heard Tara say to Manish.

Vikram joined the conversation among the men, who sat near him. “I coordinate with the factories,” I heard him say.

Vikram’s mother looked over and asked me, “Do you enjoy cooking?”

“I do,” I lied.

“We live in an extended family,” she said. “Do you get along well with others?”

“I do,” I said.

The interview of yes-or-no questions continued, and soon everyone began to listen. “Do you have many friends?” “Do you keep stay in touch with your cousins?” “Is your family close?”

Eventually, Vikram and I were able to pick up the conversation, after I answered all of his mother’s questions for me.

“You’re enjoying college?” he asked.

“Very much.”

“What do you hope to do with English and psychology?”

“I want to teach,” I said, before I could think. I wanted to *teach*? I had no idea until that moment. I imagined a classroom full of girls, each poised with a notebook ready to take dictated notes. “Put your notebooks away,” I would say to them. “Put your

textbooks away,” I would say to them. “You’re here to think, not to memorize,” I would say to them. Of course I wanted to teach.

My mother stared at me in disappointment.

“How *nice*,” said Vikram’s mother.

The conversations continued, superficial and awkward, until they left. They all said goodbye, and Vikram’s mother took my hand again before leaving. When they were gone, the servant cleared all the teacups and plates.

Mama pulled me aside into her room. “How could you tell them such a thing? Even if you want to teach, keep it to yourself. You’ll never get a husband this way.”

“Maybe he won’t mind.”

“I won’t be surprised if they don’t come back. You can’t keep sabotaging like this.”

“It wasn’t sabotage. I’m just telling the truth.”

“Truth? You don’t tell these people the truth!” It seemed an odd statement coming from the same woman who had taught us honesty. “Just be careful next time.”

I rather liked Vikram, but I still felt it best to tell people what I wanted. If they didn’t like it, let them reject me. Maybe I’d find someone who would allow me to work. Love, of course, was out of the question—love had been out of the question the moment I agreed to an arranged marriage—but I might still find someone who would respect my wishes. It was possible.

When I went to my room that night, I thought very little about Vikram. I thought about what it would be like to teach. I would teach in a place where all the other teachers

were horrible, and make people use their minds. I would ask them to imagine things, to guess things that aren't in their books, to think about different possible answers.

I would call on a girl, a timid young girl who looked quietly down.

"And what do you think?" I would ask.

"What do you want me to say, Ma'am?"

"I want you to say your opinion, whatever it is."

And she would begin to speak, and I would learn from whatever it was that she said. I could learn more as a teacher, one like Mrs. Whitney, than I did as a student. All that powerlessness and uncertainty, everything that made me uneasy about myself, was gone. But marriage—marriage might change my conviction, might make me shaky, might send me to the kitchen instead of the library. I had to find a man who would allow me to work. He could be ugly, repulsive even, and I would live with him; I would sleep with him; I would bear our ugly children.

As it happened, Vikram's parents came, and Vikram wanted to see me again. Papa said yes. This time, the meeting would be with brothers and sisters present but no adults. They wanted to see me in public, see how I got along with the family. And it would not be in the house, but out at a restaurant. They had decided on a nice Punjabi restaurant, the restaurant that had the best *parathas* and *lassi*, better than even the roadside *dhabas*. I would go with Tara, and he would bring his two brothers and their wives to meet me.

I wore the blue and purple *churidar kurta* Mama suggested—I liked it too—and Tara wore pink. The driver dropped us and would wait for us at the restaurant.

When we went inside, the group was already waiting. Vikram's two brothers looked so different from him. Both were short and stocky, with their mother's face rather than their father's. They looked feminine, but without grace. The brothers' wives, though, were pretty. One was tall and slim like a model and the other petite; both the women had streaked hair and perfect makeup. They had the sort of beauty that takes great effort to maintain.

Everyone stood up and smiled, and we introduced ourselves. When we sat, they put me across the table from Vikram so we could talk. The sisters-in-law asked me all the same questions as the mother had, and satisfied with my answers, began talking to each other about their children. "Rishi said the funniest thing today," said one to the other, "Mama, he said, why do bugs have so many legs?" The other said something to prove that her son was smarter.

Meanwhile, the two brothers started to ask me questions. "A college girl, heh?" I answered yes. "Like to study?" I answered yes. Soon they grew bored with me and started to talk to Tara, who rambled on and on about how she and some of her friends had gone to eat *biryani* instead of going to class. The brothers encouraged her, asking questions about what the *biryani* tasted like, whether it was chicken or mutton *biryani*, how many friends she went with. The wives took no notice of their husbands as the two men stared at Tara, who was twenty times more beautiful than their wives.

"How was college today?" Vikram asked.

"It was good. I learned about metaphors." I thought about the example from class, the leaden circles of Big Ben, such a fine metaphor; I wished I had been as clever



as to have written it. I made a note to myself to buy the book, to read it soon before I lost my excitement.

“I remember learning that in my literature class.” He looked at the menu, and we were silent for a moment. “Are you and your sister vegetarian?”

“We eat everything.”

“We, too.”

I watched him study the menu. “Why did you come back from America?”

“I had planned it that way,” he said, looking up. “I enjoyed New York, but after four years, it was time to come home.”

“What’s America like? New York must be very violent?” I imagined it like the American movies with muggings and shootings, people with pigeons all over their heads in the park, people being mean to each other.

“It’s actually okay. My college was friendly and pretty safe. It’s a little like Bombay.”

“Oh. Okay... You know they have good *lassi* here?”

“The best,” he said.

We looked over at Tara and the two brothers, trying to join their conversation. Tara said, “And then the ox went running away!” and I couldn’t figure out what they could be talking about. “The ox!” said the brothers, laughing.

I took a few slow breaths, looked at Vikram again, and asked softly enough that only he and I could hear it, “Does it bother you that I want to continue college?”

He looked surprised, but collected himself quickly. “Of course not. I finished college. So should you.”

“Does it bother you that I want to teach school when I finish?”

“No.”

“I really do want to work. I mean, I do want a family—but I would like it if I could work, too.”

“That’s okay.” He fidgeted with the straw in his water glass. His fingernails were short and bitten.

The brothers and Tara began to laugh again, and this time the wives took notice. They began to talk to Tara, so the two husbands began to talk about business to each other. Vikram joined into their conversation, and I only half-listened to Tara and the wives.

As I listened, part of me hoped that Tara would steal Vikram’s attention. If he was charmed enough by her, he might ask for her, the way Amit had. Maybe then my parents would leave me alone, after scores and scores of boys and their parents asked for Tara instead of me. Or maybe one of them would marry Tara, and I would be considered an old maid forever. And I would—what?—live with my parents, alone, forever? Is this what I wanted? Didn’t I want children also, children to tell about thought and defiance, to allow independence? Girls, I wanted. I would appreciate my girls. And Tara, in all her beauty, might take this away from me, might take away every man who had ever wanted me; even my husband, whoever he was, would end up wishing for her instead of me. Looking at her fair, smooth skin, her thin waist and all her surprisingly graceful angles. He would imagine himself in her bed, cursing that I was born first, thinking that God might have given him her instead of me if only she were older or he younger.

She didn't know her power, yet, but I was sure that she would learn—she was already learning. Here she was, eating her *naan* and mutton and talking about the new bowling alley, making these three men wild for her, making these two women compete with her for their husbands' attention, making me—something. I couldn't figure it out then. Tara had her power in her beauty. It was a power that people could see. Mine would have to be different, would have to be in knowledge, hidden and sneaky, a forbidden thing. I would find my own way. Let her have him.

For the rest of the evening, I joined in the conversation from time to time, but mostly stayed quiet and ate. Afterwards, we decided to walk for a while down the well-lit Brigade road, to take the long way back to our cars. Tara walked ahead, and the women and their husbands just behind her. I was surprised that Vikram stayed behind to walk with me. I wondered why, after all that, he wouldn't take the opportunity to walk with Tara. Maybe he was just being polite, I thought.

We did not say much, and it was awkward. I was glad when the night was over. I had, perhaps, already made up my mind to marry him, but I still had to convince myself that it was the right decision.

That night, I lay in my bed hoping that Vikram would say no to me. But he wouldn't say no to me—for whatever the reason, he walked with me. I imagined myself turning him down, saying, "I'm sorry, I don't love you. Can we go out a few more times so I can see?" but that sort of answer wouldn't do. The decision was *yes* or *no*, not *maybe, let's see*. I imagined him saying to me, "I'm sorry, I can't get married to you, I'm in love with someone else, but she's South Indian, so my parents won't approve." I

would look sad, and say, “I understand,” but secretly be jumping up and down in my mind.

I didn’t know him. He was a stranger, his brothers strangers, their wives strangers, his parents strangers. I would have to call a place home that was not home at all, that could never be home. But he would let me finish college. He would allow me to work. And he was not ugly or mean. I found it difficult to imagine myself sleeping in his bed, but it was something I could learn to live with. His mother seemed nice enough. An extended family would be strange, living in the same house with all of these wives and their little boys, but I supposed I could do it. And I would be near home, in Bangalore itself, and be able to see Tara and Manish and Mama and Papa whenever I wanted.

Also, there was some part of me who wanted him because he would choose me over my sister, because he would ignore her to walk with me. Like his brothers he could have ogled her, but instead he looked at me. Was this enough? That he would ask me despite her charms?

In the dark I stared at the fan swirling on a low setting, slightly off-balance and clunking as it rotated each time, and decided that I could do much worse—that I might as well choose Vikram. He had wanted to see me again, wanted his brothers to meet me, despite my being in college and wanting to work. I was sure that he must not be a bad person. He must truly want to see his wife happy, I thought.

And what was love anyway but a word? Even my books—all words. These black figures all lined up, they were not life. A word was just a thing, like a basketball or an earring. You could not eat it or make a roof of it. It was not even like a shoe that would

protect your foot from rocks on the road. It was a thing of leisure, of decoration. You could do nothing with a word but love it, and love itself was a word, as thin and unreliable as using a *dupatta* for a jacket.

## Chapter 5: There Was a Time Bomb

It was in the first few days of my engagement that I found Mrs. Whitney again—not found the spirit of her inside me or anything so vague, but actually found *her*. Mama and I were shopping for a wedding sari. We had been to city market and hadn't found anything at all. Clothes-*walas* sent fabric after fabric flying off the rolls, flinging one after another, but controlling it so carefully that each sari fell perfectly on the other, leaving just a stripe of the other for us to see. By the end, there would be forty saris all laid out on one table, an inch of each visible, and we lifted each over again to see. Purples and pinks, traditional reds, gold embroidery, silver sequins, then outfits for the other functions in blue and green, wild and bright colors. How was I to decide on such a thing as a wedding sari, that would be captured in photographs forever? Why couldn't I have lived in the seventies, had black-and-white wedding pictures like my parents', each photo with thin crepe paper separating from the next in the album? In those, the saris were grey—their colors had no meaning at all, except in the memories of the people there, and even those people would forget after years. Was it green, was it blue? What difference did it all make in black-and-white photos?

But here the color would have the utmost impact, and I could not decide on a sari. I wrote down in a small notebook all the ones I liked, the prices the shop owners had asked for, what we might bargain them down to, and the shop locations. We went all over town looking. Mama loved every moment of it, saying, "Asha, how beautiful you would look in this one," or "Who would wear such a gaudy blue? You'd look like a Muslim!"

Mama had obviously been very happy when Vikram asked me to marry him and I said yes. I only said yes on the condition that he would let me finish college and allow me to work. Somehow, he did not seem to mind either of these things. I wondered if these were some of the more liberal Sindhis—though I knew some very open-minded Sindhis, their daughters still didn't work, even though they finished college. But Vikram didn't mind it.

The *kacchi misri* was expected of course—I would not have gone to see him again if I didn't mean to accept, and he would not have invited me if he didn't mean to accept. It was a formality to actually agree, since, in essence, we already had.

As we prepared to go, I went back and forth between doubting myself, being hopeful, and already regretting my decision. But I had decided, and I would wear nice jewelry, I would wear makeup, I would dress the part of a good young wife. *Wife*—what a strange word to call myself. I was not an Auntie, only old enough to be a *didi* and still uncomfortable when little kids called me Asha Didi, so how could I be anyone's wife or—even stranger—mother? I wore bright green and tried to make my mirror image look older.

Tara came running into my room, sat down, and opened a bottle of nailpolish. “So? Will you tell me about what sex is like after you get married? American movies make it look like such fun, never mind what old people think about it. Ew. Old people shouldn't be allowed to have sex. But will you tell me when you do it, if it hurts or if it's fun or whatever?”

“Slow down. I'm not married yet.” But I might as well have been. Or not me, but this strange mirror person in green.

Tara whipped the polish on her nails quickly, one flick after another. “There’s a girl in my class, Rashmi, who everyone says is a prostitute. She would know what sex is like, but I don’t like her very much, and if she isn’t really a prostitute it would be embarrassing to ask her. But still! My own sister. You *have* to tell me!”

“Okay, fine. Happy?”

“Happy.” She smiled. “So are you nervous?”

I sat down—the car would wrinkle my clothes anyway, so there was no point trying to protect them. “Of course I’m nervous. What kind of a stupid question is that?” I took the nailpolish from her and started painting my nails. The color was dark and magenta-ish. I held my left hand still and my right hand steady.

“He’s cute, and he’s nice. His family’s annoying, but whatever. He seems okay.”

A ringing endorsement, apparently.

“Maybe I’ll meet a boy at your wedding?”

“Maybe.”

She crossed her legs and looked at me as I finished my nails. She was almost seventeen, and it would soon be time for her to begin looking. My little sister. How had she become so old, gone from an awkward child to a pretty teenager to this—woman? Time was almost visible. If I could see it—time—I imagined it would look like a sari come loose from the clothesline and floating in the air, curving around corners and going over people’s homes, somehow always moving and always staying aloft.

And I was getting married. I. It was incredible.

We left soon after, all crammed into the car. Papa was in the front seat as usual, and the driver was driving, so Mama, Tara, Manish, and I sat in the back as usual. But



Manish was getting bigger, so it became harder and harder for us to fit. As the shortest, Manish used to sit forward while we all sat back. But now Manish was taller than me, and he had taken my place as the one who leans back; I now sat at the edge of the car's seat, next to his long and spindly legs.

Manish was sporting a beard these days, though it could hardly be called a beard—it was some fifteen hairs on his chin, long and scraggly. Mama tried to make him shave it, but he said, “If Papa could have a beard when he got married, why can't I have one now?” It was not worth much of a fight, and in any case, Mama was much too happy to come down hard on any of her children. At least she made him dress properly, no matter how much he whined about it being too hot to wear long sleeves.

I had never been all that close to my brother, and I never much understood him. I suppose this was my fault for not making the effort. Tara always barged in, made herself known, but Manish was a quiet little chap. When he was small, I helped him with homework, but it had been quite a while since he had stopped asking for help. As we sat in the car, on the way to Vikram's house, I wished I had tried harder to know my brother. Did he have a girlfriend? Probably not, but who knows? What did he want to do when he got older? Had he ever smoked a cigarette, or drank a glass of alcohol? Did he ever wonder what it might be like to be a father? Did he dream about falling in love?

We reached, and everything went off quite smoothly—looking back, perhaps a bit too smoothly. I touched each person's feet as we came in. Vikram's mother was particularly welcoming, saying things like, “I'm so glad you'll be joining our family,” and “Vikram likes you very much.” Vikram was quiet, but so was I—I can't fault him for it. It was an awkward situation, all of it. They put a gold chain on me, and we fed

each other *mithai*, and I felt like some sort of strange self-impersonator. Surely this person feeding this man *mithai* wasn't me. It was wife Asha, Aunty Asha; it was myself as if I were thirty instead of eighteen.

There was a big, grandfather clock—the old, English kind—in their living room, and I thought about metaphors as the second hand slid slowly. There was that Salvador Dali painting I had seen with dripping clocks; it was long ago that I had seen it, on the Internet or in a magazine. I thought about this grandfather clock melting in the heat, or evaporating into the air like a glass of water. I found this clock to be cruel, because it was not a metaphor at all. It was moving steadily, not speeding as it went on. It was not melting, not evaporating, not changing. I wanted it to float into the air, but it stayed put. The clock had existed in exactly the same way, long before I did, and this somehow did not seem right.

When Vikram's mother came toward me, smiling, with the gold *Om* pendant hanging from the gold chain in her hands, I wanted to run away. I wanted to run before the gold chain was put around my neck, but I watched it come toward me and land on me. The fear was overwhelming, and I couldn't yell. I wanted to scream, "Let me go! This is a trick!" but I couldn't come up with the words. My body wanted me to run, but at the same time, it wouldn't allow me to move. So I smiled instead and said, "I'm so happy to be joining your family."

And everyone was happy.

After the *kacchi misri*, Vikram and I were allowed to go out together alone. That first night, he took me to a new Italian restaurant. Papa said okay, that he could take me

as long as I came back by eleven. The restaurant was off Brigades but not around very much else, except a movie rental place and a few small offices. I had never had Italian food before, and their pastas tasted very different from Indian or Chinese pastas. The noodles weren't as mushy, and the food was much less spicy but still full of all sorts of different flavors. They had sun-dried tomatoes, which were so much tastier than regular tomatoes, and big pieces of roasted garlic in the food.

It was upstairs in a small building, and when we walked in and sat down, I didn't know what to say to him. It was okay, though, because he began talking.

"Asha," he said, "I like you, and my family likes you, too."

The waiter brought bread, but was smart enough to see that this was not the time to ask us what we wanted to eat.

"Are you going to be comfortable living in an extended family?"

"I think so. I never have, but I get along well with my cousins and everyone."

"It'll be a big change. It's difficult sometimes, even for me, and I grew up with it." He took a piece of bread and spread butter on it. His hands were giant, thin but long.

"Do you think you'll continue living with your parents, or do you want to shift away?"

"I might want to start my own business someday, but for now, I'd like to stay."

"You still don't mind if I finish college and work?"

"I don't mind," he said.

The big things were settled then, and we began to talk about less important things, the frivolities of what was happening in Bangalore—that there was a new club opening,

that the last Miss World was from Bangalore and each of us knew someone who knew her, that he liked rock music and I liked what I had seen of it on MTV and Channel V.

“Tell me about New York,” I said.

“I went to college there for four years, so it seems very much like home to me, even though it’s a different kind of home. Do you want to visit the U.S. sometime?”

“I do!” I wanted to see all the places I’d read about, the South and the far West of America. San Francisco and New York and Chicago and Atlanta. A whole country full of open-minded people and women who are educated. I knew, of course, that not all of America could be like that, but I still wanted to see it with my own eyes.

“We could do it for a honeymoon. Or Europe. Do you want to go to Italy?”

“Italy?” I couldn’t imagine it. I did want to go to Italy. More than anything, enough to marry almost anyone for it. “Can we see England, too? Or France?”

“If you’d like,” he said, and I began to think that I could perhaps live with this man, marry him, have children with him and not be unhappy.

“Have you been? To Europe?”

“Once. I and a group of my college friends went one summer. It was only two weeks, but we went to Italy, France, and Spain.”

Spain. I wondered what it would be like to be in that country, a place with beautiful buildings, the running of the bulls I had read about, such a history. “What did you do in Spain?”

“My friends wanted to see the art museums. We went to the Prado. It was very interesting, but I don’t know about art, so I didn’t know about the artists or the types of

paintings or what not. And we watched a bullfight in Valencia, and it was bloody—no place for a lady. I don't want to see it again, either. Once was enough.”

I spent the whole evening making him describe the places he had seen, and I couldn't get many details from each description, but this was a man who was well-traveled and educated in the way that I wanted to be. I wanted to see these places—these museums and churches, piazzas and opera houses. I even wanted to watch a bullfight, just to see what it was like. I thought that maybe Vikram would allow me to see it if I asked enough.

At the end of the night we walked together along the back roads, the little *gullis* behind main roads. We began to talk about the wedding, the food we wanted there, the different functions. He wanted the youngsters to be able to change into jeans and go pub-hopping after each function, if the functions got over early enough. That sounded wonderful, so non-traditional, so much fun. I had been to a pub or two in the past, but never pub-hopping with a group of friends. I certainly wouldn't have expected my future husband to suggest that I go pub-hopping with him.

After the evening was over, I wasn't as afraid of marriage as I had been before, and I thought about how very lucky I was to have accepted a man who was so educated, so interested in new things, someone who might, over time, learn to respect me.

Appearances are like that. He is, I still believe, such a man—he is nice, educated, and even respectful. I was so hopeful when he treated me as he did, as an equal, as a friend to be trusted instead of a wife to be controlled. I imagined myself in Italy with my new husband, looking up at the Sistine Chapel, full of awe and eagerness to see what would come next. A home. A teaching job. Daughters. A bookshelf.

A piece of sari fabric flew toward me and landed on the table, and the merchant said, “You like, madam?” He began to unspool more of them before I could answer.

“Mama, I need a break. We’ve been doing this all morning—I’m going to go buy some *bhel* or a guava or something from one of the guys outside. You want something?”

“Don’t eat that! You don’t know where those men’s hands have been, and you want to eat their dirty street food?”

We had this discussion often, and it was the same each time. “Mama. You used to eat this food all the time when we were young.”

“Yes, but that was when you were young, before I realized how dirty it is.”

“Nobody ever died from eating a guava,” I said, and left her as I ran outside. I had always wondered what it was, finally, that changed her mind about street food. It was always, “do you know where their hands have been,” and it had to have been something that someone told her, or something she had seen them doing. Maybe she saw one of them with his hands in his trousers, but it was just as likely that a cook at a five-star would do that. More likely, in fact, because these men were in the middle of the road, and cooks at five-stars are tucked away in a kitchen.

It was nice to be outside. We had moved, since morning, from City to Commercial Street, and we were in the back roads of Commercial now. I walked toward the main road, saw a roasted peanut vendor, and went up to him.

“Two-rupee or five-rupee?” he asked. The five-rupee newspaper cone was too big.

“Two-rupee.”

He made the cone in one quick movement, grabbed a handful of peanuts, and threw them in. I was about to go back, when something familiar across the road turned my head.

It was Mrs. Whitney. It was the back of her head I saw, and her hair was longer, but her height was right, and anyway, how many white people are there running around Bangalore? I walked across to say hello. I had thought she had left, that she would be back in the US by now. It had been a year since she had disappeared.

“Mrs. Whitney?”

She turned around and smiled. “Asha! It’s nice to see you! How are you?”

“I’m fine. Would you like some peanuts?”

“No thanks. What are you doing here?”

“Shopping,” she said. Of course she was shopping! It was a stupid question. Why was I so nervous to talk to her? She was the same Mrs. Whitney as before. She hadn’t grown tusks or anything.

“How are you enjoying the boys’ school?”

“It’s nice,” she said. “It’s different, but it’s been fun to work with a different group of kids. What are you up to these days?”

“I’m in college.”

“Great!”

I didn’t want to tell her the rest. I felt like I would disappoint her by saying it, but it had to be said. “I’m getting married in December. But he’s going to allow me to finish college.”

“That’s wonderful, Asha. Congratulations.”

“My mother and I are shopping for wedding saris.”

A blond, white man holding shopping bags in one arm and a child in the other came up behind her. “Debbie? Ready to go?”

Debbie. That was her name? She didn’t look like a Debbie. She looked like a—well, a Mrs. Whitney. And this man must have been her husband.

“Michael,” she said, “This is Asha. She was one of my students when we first came here.”

He put the bags down. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said as he looked me directly in the eye and shook my hand. It was strange—an Indian man would never shake my hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Whitney.” The baby in his other arm was not even a year old.

“This is Adam,” he said.

I looked at Mrs. Whitney, and it dawned on me finally, too slowly, what had happened. “That’s why they fired you?”

She didn’t say anything, just stood there.

“But you’re married! There’s nothing wrong with that! Married women are supposed to have babies. They can’t expect that just because most of them are nuns, that the others aren’t supposed to have kids, like it’s some kind of sin! It’s unfair!”

It was the kind of anger I had never felt before; the injustice of the whole thing overwhelmed me. That’s all she had done wrong, and it wasn’t even *wrong*—to have children? That’s all she had done. Nothing about disrespecting the curriculum or using the wrong books. “If they want us all to grow up and get married and have kids, you



were setting a *good* example! I don't understand why they'd do that, why they'd fire you for doing what you were expected to do anyway. Aren't you angry?"

"Asha," she said calmly, "It's okay. I'm not angry." And then I remembered that, for her, this had happened a whole year ago. She would be long past angry.

"I'm sorry. I just think it's unfair."

"It is unfair," she said. "But no regrets. I'm happy. Have you been reading a lot lately?"

"A lot for college, but not as much for fun anymore." It was true—it was a lot of textbook reading, sometimes dry and boring, but never as bad as what textbooks used to be. "My classes are good, though. I'm doing literature and psychology. I'm reading *Hamlet* now."

She nodded her head the Indian way, which seemed very strange. I supposed that if I were in America for a few years, I would start to nod my head the American way, up and down. "That's great," she said. "*Hamlet*'s wonderful. It's one of my favorites. I think it's second only to *King Lear*."

I held my hand out to the baby, and he grabbed my finger. He was a little blond-haired baby, with huge brown eyes and long eyelashes. "Eh," he said.

"He's really cute." I pulled my fingers slowly away from him.

"Thanks," said Mrs. Whitney.

Mr. Whitney picked up the bags again, and he looked ready to leave. "I think I should go back to the store," I said. "My mother's waiting for me."

"It was good to see you again, Asha. Take care of yourself. And have a great wedding." She took the baby from her husband, held him against her with one arm.

“I will. It was good to see you, too.”

As they walked away, the baby looked over his mother’s shoulder at me. I smiled at him, knowing he couldn’t see it or interpret it, but hoping he would anyway. He looked like his father with all that blond hair.

I had known that there was a Mr. Whitney, but it was strange to see him. It was also strange to see Mrs. Whitney anywhere but in a school—I had never seen her in public before, and it was unsettling. I don’t know why I felt this way; I knew she was a real person, that she would go shopping like anyone else.

They had fired her because she was pregnant—that was it, my big mystery. It was horrible to be a woman, I thought. No man would lose his job because his wife was expecting. She probably didn’t even plan it. If it just happened—well, that’s it. Job over.

But she got another job. Her husband allowed her to go on teaching, to continue her career. No Indian man would do that, I realized, not even the nicest man in all India. How was I to find a husband who would allow that? I wouldn’t. Children or career—this was my choice. What Indian man would allow his wife to work *instead* of having children? What family would put up with a woman who refused—refused!—to have children? It would not be tolerated. I could put it off a few years, though. Long enough to finish college, to teach for a year or two, but no longer. But I supposed that a few years would be better than nothing.

I went back to the store, and Mama had chosen two saris that she liked. She held both up, one in each hand.

“I like this one,” I said, pointing to a light purple sari with gold and silver thread embroidery all over it. “Let’s get it.”

She looked at me like I was mad. “Asha, we still haven’t seen the other places. And what about all the ones you liked in the stores at City?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I like the sari. I think it’s really pretty. Let’s get it and move on and buy the other things.”

We bought the sari. My heart just wasn’t in it anymore. It might as well have been orange—what difference did it make? In the end, it was all the same.

I looked at *Hamlet* again that night, trying to forget Mrs. Whitney and all that had happened during the day. I opened to the place in the book I had read over and over, that I could not get out of my mind, when the queen says that Ophelia has drowned. I thought about the sari I had bought as I read.

The sari was heavy. All of the embroidery and the small sequins were so, so heavy. When the tailor measured me for the blouse and wrapped me in the sari, I felt trapped under so many layers. This is half of what it would feel like to drown, I thought—wrapped in cloth on the outside. The other half would be to have cloth on the inside, just under my skin, inside my feet, a stomach full of thread and lungs full of sequins. The *palloo* over my head was a great weight, like a hat with dumbbells or a box of glass.

What must Ophelia have felt like in that moment, when she went into the water? Did she struggle to stay down? Tie rocks to herself? Did she decide to live at her final moment, just when it was too late? What must it have felt like to be so desperate as to

have no choice? And everyone always said, *Oh Hamlet this, Oh Hamlet that, poor man, that Hamlet*. They loved him, my classmates—they loved him, they wanted to marry him, they wanted to mother him. Who's in despair? Who is it that needs a mother, a lover? I wanted to yell at all of them, say, *What is wrong with you all!?* *Poor Hamlet?* Did they not see it?—was the whole world mad?

I had never imagined drowning before reading this, but I began to think about it often—drowning in the ocean, in the Ganges, in the bathtub. Would the water feel heavy or impossibly light? Would it be like disappearing slowly, fading out like the end of a movie, or would it be quick, sharp, painful? Surely there was a better way to commit suicide; drowning can only come from true despair, from a desire to punish oneself for—what? I fell asleep wondering.

And then I was just outside the house, standing on the road. It was daytime, and two children in school uniforms played cricket down the lane, speaking in Kannada to each other. A cow tried to get into plastic bag in the rubbish pile at the turn. I watched her tear it apart with her teeth. It was full of potato chips, and she ate them along with most of the bag.

It was a dry, hot day, but there was a dirty puddle in the road in front of me. My reflection looked like a wavy, rippling version of my mother.

The puddle began to grow, to expand outward and up like a bubble around me. I was not afraid of it, and stayed still as it rose up. For a while I was watching myself as on television, from outside the bubble, as the bubble completed itself and filled with water. I stayed perfectly still, watching myself in this single moment, drowning in

something that had created itself just for me. And then I was back inside it, looking out at the distorted and strange house in front of me as I took the water into my lungs.

I woke up before dying, of course. One always wakes up before dying.

I read as quickly and greedily as I could following that night, as if there was a time bomb waiting to blow up all my books—or worse, the library I had created. A crater, big hole-in-the-ground that was once a palatial structure. It wasn't palatial, of course. It was a small and paint-peeling library. It wasn't even the library itself that I cared for. I couldn't articulate what it was, but I felt like this was my last chance to read, my last meal.

I had to spend all my evenings and weekends planning for the wedding. The wedding, rushing quickly like wild horses, and poof, one day, here it is!

I fell in love with books all over again, and could not imagine that I ever mistrusted words. They were more true, more real, than anything. These people were from real people's minds; they were the people we all wished to be, feared, wondered about, and stared at. When I was reading alone, locked in a room, I felt more at home than when I was with all my family.

I started reading difficult philosophy and religion. As I began to formulate my ideas, every idea broke apart into a swarm of questions. I was not an existentialist. I believed some of Marx, even though communism was supposed to be bad. Did I believe in Buddhism? Did this make me not Hindu? Could I be Christian at the same time as all of this? And what did Descartes mean when he said "I think, therefore I am?" How is it that this man was responsible for geometry, too?—was it even possible for one man to

think so much? The philosophers used to be mathematicians and scientists and artists at the same time as being rhetoricians and astronomers and theologians. Who gave them the idea that they could do all of it? If they could think about all of this at once, why couldn't I? Some of these men died for their beliefs. I had heard, of course, of Gandhi willing to die on hunger strikes, but had I understood who Gandhi was and what he believed? No. Free India, yes, but why? How? What made Gandhi the way he was?

My questions became other questions, but I liked it. My college looked at the pieces of the world as separate, but they weren't separate at all. We could see people's psychology from the literature they wrote. We could consider the history of an author instead of looking only at the book. What did people tell them when they were young? Who were their parents? I wanted to know these things, and I discovered the Internet again as I looked for answers.

I can't recall much about the preparations for the wedding because my mind was elsewhere. I chose my jewelry, all the outfits for my trousseau, the wedding cards, the saris for the different occasions, all without much hesitation. We sent *tokras* for Diwali and Vikram's nephews' birthdays and all sorts of occasions, with 5 kilos of *mithai*, fruit, chocolate, and liquor, all wrapped in ribbons and cellophane paper. Tara chattered on with Mama and the other Aunties; I tied ribbons around the tops of the *tokras* and made the bows lay flat.

I came to know Vikram better, and he and his family were as friendly as I had hoped. In those months, I drank lots of tea and ate lots of *mithai*, listened to congratulations and said a hundred thank yous.

And then my relatives started to come in from all over, from the US and Canada, from Spain, from all over India, from St. Maarten and St. Thomas, from Singapore.

Mama was the youngest of all her brothers and sisters—much younger, in fact—so all my cousins were in their thirties, and all their kids were still quite small. The wedding was in December; all the children were out of school, and a lot of relatives were able to come.

Papa only had one sister, and his sister had no children—still, though, she was there.

And a whole bunch of Mama's and Papa's cousins came, and friends. The house was constantly moving. There were people sleeping on the floors in multiple rooms. Even though a lot of people stayed in the hotel, the house was crowded with everyone at all times of the day. No one had three seconds in the bathroom before someone knocked.

Kids played cricket in the house with bouncy balls and their fathers' shoes as bats, their mothers yelled at them to stop, Tara and Manish fought each other about everything and sometimes joined in the cricket games, and we all ate dinner together at different restaurants every night. We took up half the tables in any restaurant, and the men fought for the check so they could show how rich they were by paying. This was all quite chaotic compared to the few months before it, but it was a wedding household—what else could I expect? Mama and Tara loved all the noise; Papa hated it, I think, and he hid away in his study when he wasn't running wedding errands.

And when the whirlwind of preparation was over—when it was time, finally, to begin—my mind came back to where it was supposed to be all along. I was going to get married. The gold chain around my neck reminded me about it when I needed reminding, but now everyone was here, and it was time.

**Chapter 6: “Timid Little Thing”**

The rituals were all tossed together in a pile of confusion. Mama thought that one thing was supposed to happen, her sisters advised her differently, the Aunties in town said something different, Papa’s sister said something different, Vikram’s parents said something different—no one knew what anyone was supposed to do. Four times around the fire or seven? *Mithai* or *Misri*? How many rupees were people supposed to give the *Mahraj* when he came around? Should they do my *mehndi* first, or wait until the *mehndi* ceremony? No one knew any of these things; or rather, everyone thought they knew. The women whispered to each other while the men drank whisky in another room and talked about business, cricket, anything but the nitpicky details of a wedding.

We had the major ceremonies scheduled already—they were in the invitation. The *pakki misri* was on a Thursday, the *mehndi* and *sangeet* on Saturday, and the wedding on Sunday. Friday was reserved for poojas and all of the ritualistic stuff that everyone was now arguing about. But the group had decided, Mama front-most in it, and I was told which poojas and smaller ceremonies I was to be part of. The boy’s sisters—or in this case, sisters-in-law and female cousins—would dress me up with jewelry and flowers. There would be a *ghari* pooja during that day at some time. And there would be some poojas that only my side of the family would be invited to; Vikram would have his own.

I wondered what sort of chaos was happening at his house. Were they as crowded and excited as we were? Was there as much preparation? The boy’s family had much less responsibility, of course, but they were still paying for the photographer, and they still had the poojas for the boy. There was the sacred thread ceremony and the *ghari*



pooja, at the very least. Who would make all these decisions in his house? I somehow had no doubt that it would be his mother. This, all of this, is very much women's work.

The *pakki misri* ceremony was at a temple, and it all went smoothly. The *Mahraj* spoke in Sanskrit and no one knew what he was saying. I thought that I should someday try to learn Sanskrit. There was so much that had been written in Sanskrit, so much wisdom and poetry, that knowing it would be even more rewarding than knowing Latin or Greek. Instead of Western mythology, I could read Eastern—my own mythology—without the filter of the values of the people who translated it. I listened to the *Mahraj* speak, so many rhythmic “a-a-has” in each phrase, drawn out in such a way—if I could learn what it meant, maybe I would understand this mystery of marriage.

Vikram and I had decided to postpone our honeymoon so we could do it properly. We would go to Europe, but we would need more time to plan it and to get the best rates. Because the whole world had study holidays in December, it was a popular time for people to visit Spain and Italy. Yes, we would wait a while to do the honeymoon the way we wanted.

And now it was the engagement ceremony. All I could do was listen to the hypnotic words of the *Mahraj* as he spoke and told us to do things.

“Put the ring on her left hand,” he told Vikram.

The diamond ring fit perfectly, was made to my size exactly. It slipped slowly past my nail, over the knuckle, to the base, where it nestled in without questioning. Vikram's fingers brushed mine as he slid it on, and his long, large hands moved so delicately and with such grace.

“Put the ring on his right hand,” the *Mahraj* told me.

I took his hand and slid his ring on, awkwardly and haltingly. It snagged on a knuckle but pushed past, and it stayed put at the base of his long, thin finger. He looked straight at me. I looked down, tried not to catch his eye, and when I did I looked away. I don't know why—I had come to know Vikram in these few weeks—but still I was a little wary; still he seemed a bit of a stranger.

All the members of Vikram's family fed all the members of our family sweets, *misri* and *mithai*. I don't particularly like *misri*—it's just rock sugar, and it's *so* sweet—but I ate it all day. And everyone said their “vadhay ho” and I was the center of attention. I *hated* being the center of attention like that, all the Aunties from Vikram's side coming to kiss my cheeks, and I bowing and touching their feet.

My *lehnga* that day was beautiful. It was made of a light teal silk with fuchsia and gold embroidery, the sort of thing that might have been in style in the seventies and felt so very modern at the same time. I felt like I was in an old Hindi movie wearing that *lehnga*, with my hair all pulled up as it was. I was outdoors, perhaps, singing a song for my lover, with all the girls singing the chorus. I was a wild girl, perhaps, singing of how I would never need a man—and this, of course, before I met the perfect one. I imagined dancing on the Alps and darting quickly through a forest, *dupatta* trailing in the wind. My costume was from a different era. When we rode to the hall where we would celebrate the engagement, I was careful not to crease the skirt, and I folded the *dupatta* loosely in my lap.

When we walked into the hall, many people were already there, talking and laughing. Vikram and his family had arrived, and the men and boys were drinking beer and whiskey. The food on the two full buffet tables was still covered, but it was early

yet; only eight. Servers were carrying around plates of *samosas*, *pakor*as, *chicken tikka*, *haryali kabobs*, and *chutney* with stacks of napkins. The women were trying very hard to eat the greasy appetizers without smearing their lipstick.

Tara and Manish ran around from place to place, playing with our cousins' children. I moved around the room, saying hello to people, but I tried to keep to myself.

I went to find the washroom, and the hotel was like a labyrinth. I walked down a corridor looking for it, and I heard my name from a little area recessed behind the wall. I was easily able to slide against the wall; they must have moved there to be concealed, but it made it easy for others to conceal themselves and listen.

I could not differentiate voices from one another. All I could hear was their words, and even then they were unclear, because the women were speaking in a low voice, almost whispering.

"She's stubborn, but Vikram will convince her. She's grown to respect him."

"But why would he say yes?"

"He likes her. She's young and pretty. And he promised me that this would be settled."

What, I wondered. What? What would be settled? I flattened my back against the corner and pulled the sides of my skirt in so no piece of cloth would fly into view.

"What nonsense is this, Madhu? You can't let this go on, and in your house. A wife still in college? It's absurd. You can't be a wife and be going off all day everyday. And college is one thing, but what is all this nonsense about working?"

"We said yes because Vikram promised to take care of this. I trust him. And her parents are respectable."

“This is a bad start. What will people say?”

“People won’t say anything. She’ll obey him when he’s her husband. She’s a timid little thing. You think she’ll go against him?”

I heard a rustling of clothing, and I walked away, thankful that the hotel corridors had carpet. A timid little thing. Obedient. Is this what they wanted from me? I should have known, but it still came as a surprise to me. Vikram had promised me that he would allow me to finish college; he had promised his mother exactly the opposite.

And she—with all her sweetness and all her welcoming smiles, all this time thinking that I was timid and would obey her and her son out of fear. I sat down in the corner of another corridor, on the carpet, not worrying now about crushing my pretty *lehnga*. *This* was what these people thought of me. *This* was what I was to marry into.

Who those women were, I didn’t know. Probably her sisters. A daughter-in-law or a friend would never speak to her like that. If she was so worried about embarrassment, she probably didn’t even tell her friends I meant to finish college.

I couldn’t cry. This was no time for tears. I had to do something, stand up and do something, but I was stuck in a small corner at the end of a corridor and couldn’t move. Could she have been right? Was I a timid little thing? Would I obey them, finally? I had to find Vikram, talk to Vikram, but I couldn’t move through this maze—I couldn’t even begin. My legs felt like they were asleep, but they were not. It was like the dream, the one where you dream that you’re awake but you can’t move your limbs out of bed. Every bit of strength you have cannot make you move even a millimetre. I wondered if Ophelia had felt like this as she jumped, unable to swim because she was unable to move.

I pulled myself up, finally, and went back into the hall. People were dancing now, and the servers were uncovering the food. When I saw Vikram, I found that I didn't want to talk to him. I would put it off until later, and for now—well, I would smile and say hello to everyone, pose for photos, dance with my sister and eat chicken.

Vikram suggested that all the youngsters go to the pubs after the engagement party, and the hotel was quite close to my house. Tara and I stopped home to change into jeans, and I washed off all of that awful makeup from my face. Manish begged to go, but Mama said that fourteen is too young to go out drinking—and it is. Most of our cousins were too old to be interested or too young to be old enough, so it was me, Tara, our cousin Mahesh who was thirty-two, a couple of our family friends, Vikram, and his brothers, cousins, and friends. The brothers' wives went home to take care of their babies, so mostly it was a group of teenagers and people in their twenties, about fifteen of us, crammed into one car and on a few motorbikes.

I had decided to talk to Vikram when we were out, when there were fewer people around to look for us. We went to a little pub on a side street of Brigades, just above stairs and wood-paneled all over. I had only sipped beer and liquor before, but I had never tried these drinks like daiquiris that I had heard about, and I was curious to taste them.

We all sat down on an outside patio, because the weather was not too hot and there was a nice breeze blowing. A lot of the boys split pitchers of beer. I leaned over to Tara and whispered, "What should I get?"

"Get the pina colada," she said.

“What is it?”

“It’s pineapple and coconut, and it has coconut rum. It tastes nice, though.

You’ll like it.”

“Okay. What are you getting?”

“I’ll get a screwdriver. You can try a sip. It has orange juice.”

I was sitting next to Vikram, but I didn’t talk to him much. I couldn’t pretend that everything was okay, but I couldn’t confront him.

The pina colada tasted wonderful, with only a little bitterness from the rum.

While everyone was drinking, I pulled Tara aside. I couldn’t keep all of this to myself anymore, even though it had only been a few hours.

“Let’s walk,” I said to her.

“We’re going to the ladies room. I’ll be right back,” I said to Vikram.

Tara and I walked outside the pub and went down the street a bit.

“Isn’t Aman cute?”

“Which one’s he?” I asked absentmindedly, not really caring what she said.

“He’s the cute one! You know, Vikram’s cousin with the good hair.”

“Okay.”

“What?” she asked. “What’s up?”

“I’m not sure what to do,” I said, not quite ready to explain this but not ready to stay quiet.

“What to do about?” She raised her eyebrows at me and we kept walking.

There was a rubbish pile next to a stone wall that had printed on it, *No Littering*.

*Fine for littering: Rs. 50.* I stopped and looked at it for a second.

“What?” she said. “Asha, you’ve been acting weird all night. Talk.” She stopped and faced me, hands on her hips.

I took a few breaths, slowly. “I overheard Madhu Auntie talking to her sisters. At least, I think it was her sisters. She said that Vikram had promised her he wouldn’t let me finish college. And it sounds like even if I finished college, they’d never, ever let me work.”

“But everyone’s here already. You’re already getting married.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“I’m going to talk to him. I might have to call it off.”

“The *wedding*? You’re going to call the wedding off? Are you mad?”

“What?” This was not at all what I had expected from her. I had expected her to help me, to conspire with me, to encourage me to do it. I expected support or sympathy. I thought at the very least it would appeal to her sense of adventure, her Hindi movie dreams of love marriages.

“So you can’t finish college. Did you think you would have been allowed with any other husband? And even if you do, what use is it? It’s not like you can work. No one will let you work, unless the family’s poor and you have to. Is that what you want?”

“But he lied to me.”

“Everyone’s here. We’ve already started. You can’t call the wedding off.”

Who was this person looking at me? Was this my sister? What had twisted inside of her that made her turn against me like this? “Why are you acting like this?”

“Asha, I know it’s not fair, but can you imagine what people will say about you, about all of us? You can’t do this to us.”

That’s what it was. She was looking after herself.

Can I blame her? She was young, she didn’t understand, and it’s hard to feel empathy for anyone when you’re sixteen. It would be harder for her to find a husband if I disgraced our family. And to be fair, she was only saying what she was taught. I might have thought the same thing when I was sixteen, if I had an older sister. I could, maybe, have acted the same way.

But all of this I think now, from a different country and from the future I was so unsure of then. At that moment, I only felt angry. She was looking after herself—the one time I needed her help, after all these years. My only sister.

“Tara, will you help me?”

“This is crazy. You can’t do it.”

We started walking back to the pub. I had all the answer I needed. Still, I had made up my mind that I would at least confront Vikram about it. What I would do about his answer, I wasn’t sure yet.

The place closed at three, and I proposed to Vikram that he drop me off on his motorbike. That way, we could walk for a little while alone. The group in the car agreed to take Tara home, and I said I’d follow soon. He seemed a bit drunk, but nothing alarming. I had only had two pina coladas, and I didn’t feel much of anything.

We walked down the lane and turned on Brigades, which was eerily quiet at night.



I clenched my fists and started. “I heard your mother talking to her sisters tonight.”

“Oh?” he said.

“She said that you promised her you’d make me quit college, and that I’d never be able to work.”

He answered too quickly, “I never said that. It’s a lie. Why would she say that?”

“I know what I heard.”

I stopped and waited a long time. Finally, he said, “Okay, okay, fine. I told her that, but only so I could marry you. I liked you.”

“So you lied to me.” I stared at him straight, the way I had seen people stare when they confronted each other.

“I lied, but I meant to convince Mama that you should finish college.”

“And work?”

“Asha, you know that’s not possible. What’s going to happen when we have kids? You won’t be able to work then.”

“They *why* wouldn’t you say so at the beginning, before we got engaged? If you felt so strong about it, why wouldn’t you say it?”

He took my hand and tried to sound loving. “I didn’t want to upset you. And I knew that you would be reasonable about this working thing, once we were married. You’re a nice girl. You’ll want to be home with your kids. You won’t want to leave them with a stranger to look after them.”

“You wouldn’t even consider waiting a few years to have children?”

He looked at me like I was a lunatic. “Wait? Why would you want to wait? We have plenty of money for children.”

“So that I can finish college! So I can work! Haven’t we talked about this already?” Maybe the pina coladas made my courage rise, but I was nearly yelling. It didn’t make sense. He was acting like he had never heard me before, not once in all these weeks.

“Asha, you can’t be serious. Come. You’ve had too much to drink. Let me take you home. You’ll see that it’s all okay when you wake up tomorrow.”

“You promised me. And it wasn’t just once. You told me before we got engaged, you told me after we got engaged, you kept telling me that it’s okay if I finish college and work.”

“Come. I’ll take you home. You’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“I haven’t had too much to drink. You aren’t *listening* to me!”

“Let’s go back to my bike. You’ll see. When the alcohol wears off, you’ll remember how silly you were acting, and we can laugh together. Come.”

I couldn’t storm off; I had no other way home.

I didn’t sleep very well that night, and not just because I was lying on the floor of a crowded room. I kept replaying the evening in my head. So much had happened since the previous night. There was so much about the world I still didn’t know, and I wondered if my problem was that I had fancied myself clever. How smart I felt when I made that deal with Mama! How smart I felt when I made Vikram agree to let me finish college and to let me work! As if words meant anything. This was the sort of thing Papa

had warned me about, the thing he was scared of. When he said, “Be careful,” this is what he meant. Be careful of people because they do not always tell the truth, because they can be selfish and proud, because the world does not exist for the purpose of making you, Asha, happy. The odds, in fact, are against happiness. Choose carefully, because some choices are irrevocable. He said “be careful,” but what he meant was “be clever.” And instead I ignored him.

The room was warm and I kicked the sheet off. I thought about Tara, sleeping right next to me, my sister, whom I could always count on, whom I could never count on. And Vikram, with his long hands, and Madhu Aunty with her welcoming smiles. Everyone I thought I knew before had layers I had never thought to look for. I wondered—is this what it is to be an adult? To suspect, to distrust, to search for the dirt beneath people’s finely painted nails?

The clock on the wall was moving, first four and then, all of a sudden, six, and then seven. It was time for me to wake up, to sit for poojas and listen to Sanskrit again, to perform strange rituals that no one knew the significance of, to become prepared to become a bride. I was tired but awake. I heard the house begin to move, children start to cry and to run around. Manish and Tara were both sound asleep, but the other kids in the room woke up and went to their parents or went to the kitchen. It was a nice distraction, so I stood up, brought bottles of water for the kids. One of my second cousins’ children, Hitesh, a ten-year-old boy with huge, thick glasses, came up to me and said, “Asha Didi, do you want to play book cricket with me?” So for a while I played book cricket, which is perhaps the most boring game in the world.

“Forty-six!” said Hitesh triumphantly, book open. He had probably cheated, opened to a page that ended with a six on purpose, but I didn’t mind.

I opened the book. “Thirty.”

“You’re out!” he said in a dramatic voice, like a commentator on a televised match. He took the book back from me, and we continued, he opening to fours and sixes all the time, I opening to zeros and eights. He took a small pencil and wrote our scores diligently on a sheet of ruled paper.

I would have been leaving for college, going to class, that very moment. It was Friday; in English we would be learning about putting research into our essays about *Hamlet*. Since I was so fascinated by Ophelia, I had decided to write about her, but I still didn’t know how. In psychology, we were talking about Carl Jung, whom I *loved* more than other psychologist we had read about—he twisted the crackpot Freud’s ideas into something usable, something great. I wanted to read more; I wanted to go shopping and buy something that Carl Jung had written. I wondered if Ophelia was an archetype. If she was, then who else was like her? Was *I* an archetype? Surely not—sitting here in pajamas, playing book cricket with a ten-year-old, waiting to get married and hoping that, at this very moment, an airplane would miss the airport and crash into Vikram’s house.

I saw Tara walking over. “Hitesh, why don’t you keep playing with Tara Didi? I need to go get ready,” I said.

Tara rolled her eyes at me, then looked at Hitesh’s book and score list. Her face said, *Asha, book cricket is so BORING!* It was as if the last night had never happened. I felt like a little revenge was in order, after all. She would only be able to get away from book cricket when Manish woke up, and he slept like a bag of stones.

I walked up the stairs. Run, my brain said to me. Run away. Buy an airplane ticket and go. Get on a train. Take a rickshaw. Leave before they sit you down and put *mehndi* all over you. Leave before they change your name. Timid little thing, coward, run! But instead of running away, I took a shower. The hairdresser had told me not to wash my hair, so I put it under a shower cap. I put soap on my body and thought about how, in two days, it would belong to someone else.

And then it was daytime, and I rushed into a series of poojas for this and that. There were some poojas that were done separately—mine in my house, and his in his house—and the *ghari* pooja was done together. All sorts of strange things with *haldi* powder and *sindhoor*, rice and wheat, knives and clay pots of water, and what else I don't know. One after another they came, and I was rushed around in my heavy red sari, told what to do by the *mahraj* in charge, bombarded with commands in Sanskrit I didn't understand, and overwhelmed with everything. I don't remember it the way I should. My mind was preoccupied with the previous day, with Vikram and his mother, with Tara, with the whole mess.

That night, the *mehndi-vali* came to do my hands and feet. Even though the *Mehndi* function for everyone else would be the next day, they wanted the woman to come do my *mehndi* so it would be nice and dark for the wedding. When she came, she covered a sofa with a sheet and had me sit down. It was almost dark outside, and I was exhausted from the day of poojas. She gave me a book of designs to look through, to see if there was one I liked.

I chose an intricate and traditional design, one with paisleys and mango-shapes, with dots and vines all intertwined. Aunties and kids came in and out, watched the

*mehndi-vali* for a couple minutes, then got bored and talked to each other. The woman started drawing in the very middle of my left palm, then went out with the design, covering the rest of the palm, my fingers, and my wrist, lines like a finely designed glove. Then the other hand, with perfect symmetry and thin, thin lines. My feet she started on the tops of my toes and moved toward and up the ankle. Over an hour later, I was sitting perfectly still in the same place, and the *mehndi-vali* squeezed limes and put sugar on my hands to darken the red of the *mehndi*.

I sat for a long time, talking to one Aunty after another, to little girls who asked, “How can you sit so long? Isn’t it boring?” and to Mama and Tara when they came in and out. They entertained the guests, made sure everyone was fed and happy. The further away I got from the previous day, the more I wondered if it had actually happened. Tara was acting like I had never told her about Vikram’s lies, like she had never said I was mad to want to call off the wedding. Vikram and his mother had both been friendly during the *ghari* pooja. It was as if nothing I said was actually heard—which meant that perhaps I was imagining it. Though of course I knew it wasn’t my imagination.

After everyone was settled, I went to talk to Mama. I knew what her reaction would be, but I didn’t know who else to turn to. It was after eleven and my *mehndi* was flaking off my hands and feet, leaving only the dark red pattern behind. I went into Mama’s room with her, since Papa was in his study and the bedroom would be empty.

“Yes, *beti*, what is it?” She laid a towel down so I could sit on the bed and not worry about *mehndi* flakes falling. She sat down also, looked at me, and waited.

“I overheard Manju Aunty talking to her sisters. Vikram lied to me about letting me finish college.”

“I told you,” she said, “That no one would put up with this nonsense.”

“Mama, he *lied* to me. I don’t care that he won’t let me finish college, if only he had been honest! Maybe I would have married him anyway! But he *lied*.” I played with a loose flake of *mehndi*.

“You talked to him about it?”

“Yes.”

“And he admitted he lied?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s sorry for his mistake.”

I knew that this would be frustrating, that Mama would defend him, but I thought maybe I could get her to understand. “Mama, he wasn’t sorry. He didn’t say he was sorry. He said he lied for my own good.”

“There’s nothing to be done now,” she said.

“I want to call off the wedding.”

Her eyes opened wide, as if I had just told her I had set fire to the house. “With all these people here?”

“Mama, why would you want me to marry a liar? What would you do if Papa had lied to you like this?”

She regained her composure and smiled at me. “Sometimes men don’t understand. They don’t mean to lie. They think that if they tell the truth, they’ll hurt your feelings. Little lies are okay sometimes.”

“This isn’t little,” I said. “This is big. He promised, and he’s already broken his promise, and we’re not even married yet!”

“It’s too late, *beti*. You can’t call it off now. Maybe, if it was a month ago, maybe you could have—but now you must accept it. God will take care of you when you’re married. You’ve been a good girl. God will protect you like he protected me.”

“Protected you from what?” I couldn’t imagine. Papa had always been nice to Mama, had always allowed her to have her way. And Papa was an honest man.

“From my in-laws.”

I had heard Mama mention her mother-in-law a few times before, call her demanding or unreasonable or strict. Papa hardly ever talked about her, even though he always talked about his father.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that we never talk about your Dadi? She was a horrible lady. She treated me and your Papa like dirt. God took care of us, and when he took Dadi away from us, he allowed us to have our own lives. Our lives with you and Tara and Manish. A proper family, and children that we could raise our own way, by ourselves. We could go on vacations and enjoy ourselves, play with you kids and let you have your freedom to roam around Bangalore, to go out with your friends. If Dadi had lived, that would not have been possible.”

And that was it? That was her protection? Someone had to *die* before she was allowed to live her own life. “But if you had known you would have to put up with all of that, wouldn’t you have thought twice about marrying Papa?”

“It all turned out well in the end. I couldn’t have asked for a better husband. If I called off the wedding for some stupid thing like a mean mother-in-law, I wouldn’t have



been as happy with another man. Don't ruin your future over some little lie. Vikram is a nice boy and will be a nice man. Once you're married, you'll find you can use that sharp brain of yours to get him to agree to all sorts of things."

"What?"

"Men need guidance from their wives. They might think they're in control, but that's because we let them believe that they are. Papa doesn't do anything I don't want him to do. It might look like he runs this family, but he doesn't. I do." She smiled and put her hand on my shoulder. "And you will run yours."

"Mama, you aren't listening to me. I'm not happy with Vikram. I don't want to marry him."

"Just sleep. You'll be fine tomorrow." She smiled at me sympathetically, her head to the side a bit. "You must be tired from the long day. It happens to all of us."

I scraped the rest of the *mehndi* pieces into the shower drain. I wouldn't be able to wet my hands until the end of the next day—even though the leaf mixture falls off, the residue still darkens the color all day. The longer you don't wash, the deeper the color. I would have plastic gloves on my hands and plastic bags tied to my feet the next morning when I took a shower to keep the *mehndi* from getting wet.

The flakes fell to the ground, and the design on my hands was already rather dark—not orange anymore, but rusty red. I kept the door locked and thought about Mama. Without her help, I couldn't do it. If she agreed, we could all have stood together—called off the wedding, told all the relatives to leave quietly, apologized to

Vikram and his family. Without her help, though, and without Papa's help, I couldn't do it.

Everything sounded so familiar, like an echo from a very empty stone room. No one was listening, no matter how much I explained, no matter how many words I used. Maybe I wasn't choosing the right ones. Maybe if I just explained more clearly. But it was no use—Mama, Vikram, even Tara, no one would listen. All I could hear was *everyone's here already and what will people say and you'll be fine tomorrow*. As if I were sick and this were some sort of disease.

What would Mrs. Whitney have done? I knew—I had known it the whole time. She would have followed who she was, rather than who everyone else thought she should be. Maybe she did. Maybe that's why she wasn't close to her parents. One doesn't have to be a bad person to become a stranger to her parents, I thought.

Mrs. Whitney had a self-ness that I hadn't figured out yet, that I wanted more than anything. If I got married, my self would be someone else. Not a reader, not a student, not a teacher or a scholar. Nothing but a wife and a daughter-in-law of people I don't even like.

When I finished scraping *mehndi* off my hands, I sat down on the lid of the toilet to think. The bathroom was the only place in the whole house that was quiet, the only place I could be alone. I couldn't leave home because I had nowhere to go. And I could never bring myself to make such a scene that Vikram and his family would call it off. That would disgrace my family in a way they would never recover from. Tara was right to be afraid for herself. If I made a scene here, no self-respecting man would ever marry either of us. For myself I wasn't very worried—I was beginning to think that marriage of

any kind wasn't for me. But I had no right to take that choice away from Tara. No right to make her live under her parents' roof for the rest of her life, to deny her a family because of my own selfishness.

If I could leave Bangalore quietly, people would talk for a while, but my family would be okay. People would say, "That poor family. And their other children so sensible!" They would take pity on us and eventually forget that much had happened. It would be like the children whose mother ran away, the family with the one son who fell into drugs ("such a shame—he was so promising!"), the family whose son joined a cult and committed suicide. All these families survived because no one could *see* the disgrace. Invisible, it seemed less real. Invisible, it seemed unsanctioned by the rest of the family.

But I had nowhere to go, no money, no skills to work. A single woman in India can't get very far in any case. No. Mama was right—it *was* too late. I would have to sit quietly and get married, accept my lot in life. I would have to pray to God that Mama was right, that He would take care of me, because it was too late for me to take care of myself.

**Chapter 7: Strange Way Home**

“Asha, wake *up!*” a voice whispered.

Someone was shaking me. I opened one eye, and Tara was sitting next to me, pushing on my shoulder. It was still dark. “What do you want?”

“Sshh,” she said with a finger dramatically held to her mouth. She dragged me to the downstairs bathroom and shut the door. I had only slept at three, and it couldn’t possibly be six yet—my legs felt like they were moving through honey.

“So?”

“Do you remember Aman?” She paced the tiny bathroom as she said it, then hopped onto the granite vanity, legs dangling. Her hair was still sticking up in all directions, and her pajamas were wrinkled.

“Yeah, I think so. Vikram’s cousin.”

She swung her legs like scissors. “We were talking last night, and then we went onto the terrace to look at the sky, and then...”

“Then what?”

“Then he *kissed* me! And then we talked for a long time. He’s from England, you know, and he has the *cutest* accent, and he wants me to be his girlfriend.”

“Tara, what was he doing here?”

“He snuck in to see me.”

I tried to picture him. He was perhaps twenty, perhaps nineteen; a young guy. “How can you be his girlfriend if he lives in England? It’s far, Tara. You won’t be able to go visit.”

Her legs stopped moving and she paused for a long time.

“What?”

“Promise you won’t be mad at me,” she said.

“Tara. What did you do?” She was a smart girl. She *couldn’t*.

“We did a little more than just kissing.”

“Tara, *what* did you do?”

“You didn’t promise you wouldn’t be mad at me. Promise.”

“Tell me. Tell me what.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry—I didn’t have sex with him. I don’t even know him.”

I leaned against the wall, relieved. “Then what?”

“I just—well—I let him feel under my shirt, and...”

“And?”

“Asha, have you ever seen what a penis looks like? I mean, other than on a baby?

They’re funny-looking.”

“No, I haven’t. Not in person.”

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. “Is anybody in there?” a man’s voice asked.

“This conversation is *not* over,” I said to her. She jumped off the vanity and we walked out.

The sun hadn’t even risen yet, and already it was a strange day. I couldn’t go back to sleep, so I made a cup of coffee instead and sat down in the kitchen, on the counter, swinging my legs as Tara had done only minutes before. Here, too, I was

alone—the servant hadn’t come yet, and Mama wasn’t awake. The granite was cool and smooth.

I couldn’t believe Tara. She hardly knew this boy at all, and already she was inside his trousers. What if he told his cousins? What if everyone found out? I was sacrificing for my family’s reputation and for Tara’s future, and Tara was going to ruin it all. What would be the use? But maybe it would all blow over, a passing fling, quickly forgotten. Maybe Tara would be as respectable a young lady as ever. She could, maybe, marry this Aman after all of this.

I wanted very much to go back to sleep. My thoughts were incoherent and jumbled up. Soon I would be shuffled about and dressed up; I would shower with doctors’ gloves on my hands and plastic bags on my feet so the *mehndi* might darken further; I would wear so much makeup that I would feel like my face was going to crack. Now, though, I was drinking coffee by myself, in my pajamas, and it was quiet.

“Asha? I was looking for you.”

I looked up, and Mama was standing in the doorway in her nightgown.

“I thought you would be asleep,” she said.

“I couldn’t sleep very well, so I made some coffee.” I tilted my head toward the pot on the stove. “Do you want some?”

“Okay,” she said. There was about one more cup left in the pot, and I poured it into a teacup.

“What were you and your sister talking about in the bathroom?”

What? She wasn’t awake that early, was she? “How did you know we were in there?” I asked.

“Uncle Ram said he saw you two running out of the bathroom.”

“It’s just a quiet place to talk.”

“Tara and one of Vikram’s cousins were on the terrace last night,” Mama said, her hands on her hips. “I think he came over to see her and she let him in through the back door. Did she tell you anything about it?”

I prayed, for Tara’s sake, that Mama hadn’t seen any of it, that no one had seen any of it. How could Tara have been so careless? The terrace was open to anyone.

“Yes. She did. She says they were talking all night.”

“Did she mention anything else?”

“She said that she was worried he would try something dirty, but he acted like a perfect gentleman.”

“That’s good. You never know with these boys,” said Mama. “And maybe, if they like each other, in a couple of years we can see.”

She was already plotting Tara’s marriage, while mine wasn’t even over yet. Was Tara’s drama all that mattered right now? Mama seemed to have entirely forgotten our conversation from the night before, entirely forgotten that this was the day before my wedding

“Mama, about last night—”

“Don’t worry. I’ve forgotten it already. Now.” She put her cup down and brushed my hair off my forehead. “It’s time for you to become a beautiful bride.”

“Who’s coming first?”

“The hairdresser. Come. Take a shower before she arrives. Don’t forget the gloves and the bags. We don’t want your *mehndi* to become light, do we?”

By afternoon, my hair was up in a bun with curls coming down from it, and the lines on my hands were a dark, deep maroon. I wore a collar of diamonds and emeralds, green bangles, and a grass green *lehnga*. The *payals* on my ankles also had green in them, and they jingled when I walked. I was perfectly coordinated, perfectly dressed and ready. My mother looked right at me and said, “Asha, you look more beautiful than your sister today.” What more could I have asked for?

The *Mehndi* party began, and all the other girls and ladies sat on the floor and had their hands done. The men would come later. I wandered around, talked to people, watched the girls who were graceful and could dance. People complimented me on my dress. Since I had accepted this marriage, I made an effort to be friendly to Vikram’s mother and her sisters, to his sisters-in-law, to all the women I would have to live with in my new home. I smiled and asked about their children or grandchildren, listened to them talk about the food and the decorations. I kept the smile pasted to my face, and it, too, felt like a part of my layer of makeup.

And then, we took a break; people scattered between the *mehndi* and *sangeet*, to freshen up or change—though the women with *mehndi* on their hands couldn’t do much beyond sit and rest, maybe drink a cup of tea. The men began to arrive, and Papa came to help set up. He put up flowers quietly, didn’t say much.

The *sangeet* was the same, much more of the same. Tara danced and everyone praised her. We ate a feast and the men drank whisky and I talked to everyone and smiled and smiled. I was so tired that I wanted to go home at seven, but the night went on until one. I was afraid my makeup was melting, but I checked in the mirror, and it stayed put.



That whole day was a flurry of smiles and compliments, and I wanted it to go slowly, but it raced by and hurtled me toward the next day, toward the wedding. I wasn't ready. I imagined the day freezing, everyone standing perfectly still in their places—Tara in mid-dance, that Aman boy with a drink in his hand, Mama talking to a group of other ladies and laughing. I thought about living my whole life with India frozen in time and space while I traveled, learned great things, fell in love.

I had excused myself from a conversation to go check on my makeup when Papa pulled me aside. "Asha, come," he said, and brought me across the hotel to a corner of the lobby that was out of sight. "Sit," he said, and I sank into the soft sofa-chair. Papa sat across from me.

"Your Mama told me what happened last night."

"About Tara? That was nothing." I wondered why he would even be talking to me about this. Why didn't he pull Tara aside and scold her about being alone with boys? What did he mean by calling me all this way?

"Not Tara. Mama told me all about your conversation with her."

I was tired of all this, tired of hearing it. "Papa, I don't care. I don't want to be scolded about this again. Look! I've been acting fine. Haven't I been smiling and being nice to all these people? Have I *once* looked unhappy today?"

"No, you haven't," he said. Sitting across from me, talking just to me in all this quietness, Papa looked quite dashing. He was dressed in a stylish sage green *kurta*, had his grey hair combed back just so. When he was young, he would have had his choice of whichever women he wanted. I thought maybe it was his side of the family that Tara took after—the tall, fair, and stately look softened to fit a female figure.

“Then what? What have I done?”

“Asha, do you *want* to marry this man?”

“Of course not. You know this. Mama told you. But it’s too late now. I should have listened to you before when you told me to be careful in choosing. I heard, ‘Oh, we’ll go to Europe for our honeymoon,’ and ‘Yes, of course you can finish college, yes, of course you can work,’ and ‘Let’s go see the Sistine Chapel,’ and I just...well...you know.”

“You’re eighteen,” he said, shaking his head.

“I know, I know. I had to choose someone. I’m getting old, and what about Tara, do I want to ruin her chances, and all that.” All of this would have been so much easier if I didn’t have a sister.

We sat quietly for a while, he staring off into something a far distance behind me, I looking at the designs on my hands. I searched for Vikram’s initials in there, looking over each finger and each palm. Of course they were hidden somewhere, but I couldn’t find them in the mess of paisleys and mango-shapes, dots and vines.

I was tired of listening to lectures about my duty to my family. That’s all I had been hearing for these past two years—my duty to Tara, my duty to my children, my duty to my husband, my duty to Mama. I was sick of all this duty. It was heavy. I was carrying it on my head like a coolie with a stack of suitcases in the train station. Day in, day out, all these suitcases.

“What do you want for yourself?” Papa asked.

“I don’t know. Not this.” I shrugged and stood up. “I should get back in the hall. People will be looking for me.”

Just after one, we all went home. It would be the last night I slept at home, and I wanted more than anything to do just that—to sleep.

I washed my face and scrubbed everything off of it, took all the hairpins out from my hair and brushed it straight, and took off all my jewelry. With each layer gone, I felt more like myself—happier, maybe, but certainly more comfortable. Finally, I was in a pair of pajamas and a shirt, barefoot even though my feet would get dirty. It felt nice to wash my hands, finally.

The little kids in the house were all tired and had fallen asleep. Many of the adults fell asleep too. Tara had disappeared, no doubt in some scheme to find Aman, but no one noticed. The house was too busy, and we were all too tired. Mama came to say “good night” to me and went off to bed. But I sat up in the kitchen again, made a pot of coffee on the stove, and crossed my legs on the counter. It was probably two-thirty, and I would have to wake up at six, but I was so tired that I wouldn’t be able to sleep. Why fight it, then?

The kitchen was warm and the coffee was warmer, but I didn’t mind. I could hear everything in this room. A dog barked in the street, and wind ran through the palm trees above our terrace. Was Tara out there now? Maybe. A monkey screeched from somewhere far away. One of the neighbors’ babies started crying—their window must have been open. I heard something large drop into the street, maybe a coconut or a rock from something. In the kitchen, mosquitoes buzzed past my ears.

I tried not to think about anything, to just enjoy my last night at home. I wanted to listen to everything, smell everything, notice the feel of everything, so I could

remember it years later when I lived somewhere else. When the new place began to feel like home, I didn't want to forget what it was like to be here.

I heard my name, and my head snapped toward the door.

"Papa, you scared me." He was standing in the doorway, one hand on the frame.

"It's late. What are you doing awake?"

"Is there coffee left?"

There was some left in the pot, enough for one more cup. I had made extra, thought I might drink another one. I poured it into a teacup and handed it to Papa. He leaned against the counter.

"Do you want something to eat or water?" I asked.

"No, it's okay." He took a sip of coffee. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"As ready as I'm going to be."

"Good," he said.

We finished our cups of coffee quietly.

"There's something I want you to have before tomorrow," he said.

I wondered—was it another piece of jewelry? A photo album? Had I forgotten something in my trousseau? Even if I had forgotten something, how would Papa know anyway? I even had nail clippers and tweezers in there.

"Come to the study."

I followed him upstairs. The tiny room's lights were still on. Papa's desk was a mess of paperwork, and the computer was still on and uncovered by the towels he usually put on it at night. "What is it?" I asked, still standing in the doorway.

He handed me a large envelope from the top of his desk. “Asha, what you do with this is your decision,” he said. “Now. You best get back to the kitchen.” He stood up, covered the computer, turned off the lights, and walked out.

At four, I was still in the kitchen, staring at the counter. I had spread the contents of the envelope out and was trying to decide what to do with them. It had been over an hour, and in another hour, the sun would begin to rise. In front of me was a rubber-banded bundle of twenty thousand rupees, a ticket to Madras on the 6 AM train, and a piece of ruled paper with the name of a college and the principal’s name, a horizontal line under it, and the name and address of a girls’ hostel. Under that, a note—“I have talked to the principal and she will admit you. I’ve sent money to ensure your place in it. The hostel has space for you. Ask for Sister Helen. I’ll handle Mama.”

That was it. Now that I could leave, now that all my prayers had been answered, I didn’t know what to do. Papa had swept in and saved me; it was almost too convenient. And it was surprising. Papa, the man in our family, the one I had expected to follow tradition. Men, I had always learned, don’t understand the female world, but are to be blindly respected anyway. But Papa *did* understand me, and for the first time, I respected him with my eyes open. He was willing to risk his family’s reputation to see me happy. I wasn’t prepared for such a solution—in fact, I didn’t think until right then that there was a solution. I had been looking in all the wrong places for help. It didn’t occur to me that, after all of my pleading for support, it would be a man who finally helped me. I could hardly believe it.

Everything I thought I knew was becoming softer and changing shape. I stared at these papers, this money, and couldn't decide what to do with it. I saw Mama saying, "Papa doesn't do anything I don't want him to do," and wondered what sort of strange fantasy she was living under. Would *this* be the kind of power I had over Vikram—to tell him to do something and have him do just the opposite? And even if I could control him, was *that* the sort of husband I wanted? I didn't want any part of it, this traditional and misshapen marriage. The whole thing, for everyone, was an illusion of happiness.

I gathered the envelope's contents and tiptoed into my bedroom, careful not to wake the people in it. I took a pair of jeans and a shirt to wear and went back to the kitchen to change. Still barefoot, I had no problem walking very quietly about the house. We had already packed my trousseau into a suitcase on wheels, one of the nice big ones that someone brought for us from the U.S. It was already downstairs, ready to go for the next day. I unzipped the outside pocket to find the small stash of birth control I had managed to bribe a pharmacist for—I wouldn't be needing it. I grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil, wrote a note to Tara—"Tara, If you do anything stupid, don't be stupid. Get more from Williams on Double Road. Love, Asha." I put it in a plastic bag from the kitchen, went upstairs, and left it in her cupboard under some clothes with a bag handle sticking out.

I found an auto rickshaw driver willing to go to City Station, remembering how, what seemed like years ago but was only a few months, Tara and I took almost the same route on the first day of college. It had rained that day, and the rain just added to my excitement. Today it wasn't going to rain; I could still see stars, it was so clear.

The rickshaw-*wala* and I crammed in the bag on the floor in the back. I would have to climb in with my feet up—there would be plenty of room back there.

“Asha!” I heard from not far away, and I looked up.

Tara was coming towards me, wearing jeans and a pink t-shirt that was way too tight and short. “Where do you think you’re going?” she asked.

“Where are you coming from? And where did you get that shirt from? Mama would go mad if she saw you in that.”

“I met Aman at the basketball courts at the end of the road. I like him a lot. He’s really funny. He says we can stay in touch by email when he leaves.” She peeked into the rickshaw and saw the bag on the back seat. “*Where* are you going with that thing?”

“Leaving,” I said.

“You can’t leave,” she said. “You can’t! What am I going to do here without you? Where are you going? And how am I going to marry Aman if you leave and make us look bad to his family?”

“I’m going, Tara,” I said calmly. “And keep your voice down. If someone hears you, they’ll know you’ve been out.”

“But, are you going far? You’ll stay in Bangalore, won’t you?” She whispered now, but a screaming sort of a whisper. The rickshaw-*wala* had gotten back in and was waiting.

“I’ll be in Madras. It’s not far. A lot of the boys I met lived across the world. This is only a five-hour train ride.”

“I’m going to tell Mama,” she said, her hands on her hips. “I’m going to wake her up. You can’t *leave*.”

“Tara, I told you I was thinking of calling off the wedding. Well, this is how I’m doing it.” I was surprised at how calm I was, and how hysterical she was. If you had asked me before this what would happen if I ran into Tara on my way to the station, I would have seen myself acting much differently. “You didn’t listen to me.”

“You weren’t serious, though. You couldn’t have been serious. You’re not leaving. I’m going to wake Mama up right now.” She stared straight at me—this was a girl who was used to confronting people, who was fearless.

“If you tell her I’m leaving, I’ll tell her about you and Aman. Keep quiet.”

She took her hands off her hips. “You’re going, then?”

“I am. I left something for you in your cupboard, under your jeans.”

“Will you email me when you get there?” Her look reminded me of the ten-year-old Tara, the one who wanted to follow me around rather than wanting me to follow her.

“Of course.”

“Can I visit you?”

“Of course. I’d love it.”

“What are you going to do there?” she asked.

“I’m going to go to college.”

She started laughing. “You are *such* a nerd!”

“Maybe I am,” I said, now laughing too.

She ran back to the door, and I hoped she would have time to change that shirt before anyone woke up. The rickshaw-*wala* was patiently waiting for me. I climbed in and looked one last time at the strange concrete lion-head on the corner of our terrace, who peeked at me from behind the banana leaves.



The train station was crowded. I realized I should have gone from Cantonment instead of City, even though the train stops for only four minutes at Cantonment. But here I was, at City, watching the sun rise quietly and without ceremony.

A man with a book and food cart came to a stop just a few meters away from me, and I thought about buying a magazine or a pirated book from him. I looked at the selection from where I was sitting and realized I would have a lifetime to read in Madras.

Madras would be a city full of libraries, full of books, full of new experiences. I would never have to explain myself to anyone. I could read, use the Internet to learn things, anything I wanted whenever I wanted. Twenty thousand rupees is not much, but suppose when I finished college, I got a job and bought thousands of books for myself—big, small, magazines and hardcovers, old and dusty softcovers, science and history and fiction. Suppose I got a flat and lined its walls with shelves for books. Suppose I had a home of my own.

I played with the name tag on the suitcase, looking at all the hazy, diverging tracks on both sides of the station. So many different ways. They came together and split back out like a paint splatter, but they were not random. Each would end somewhere, in Calcutta or Bombay, in Kodaikanal or Kanyakumari, in Mysore, in Madras. This metal web was amazing in its vastness, and incredible in its intricacy and all its possibilities.

As the train rumbled around the bend toward us, people scrambled to the platform, pushing each other. A woman with two little children and four large bags struggled with all of it. A man in dress pants was waiting for someone, standing back

and tapping one of his shiny shoes impatiently. A white couple looked lost, walking back and forth on the platform. Children woke up in their mothers' arms and started screaming. Coolies walked quickly with suitcases piled on their heads, and another vendor brought his cart to the platform, yelling "Magazine! Newspaper!" A crowd gathered by where the doors of the train would soon be.

This crowd would be my last look at Bangalore for a long time, and I took it in greedily, like air after swimming underwater. Manish would grow up without me there to see it—he would have a real beard by the next time I could come home, if I were ever welcome there again. And Tara, Tara would never crash through the door of my bedroom again, never drag me out for an adventure, never wake me up to tell me a secret. She would come to visit, but she would be a guest in my home—there would be no *our* home. Both of them would be older, wiser, more mature the next time I could see them. And nothing would be the same.

The color on my hands had deepened further, and I traced the intricate design with one painted fingernail. I imagined myself at home—the hairdresser putting my hair up in a bun with curls, the ladies of the house wrapping me in that heavy, lovely sari. My mother would have been so proud. I would have been a beautiful bride.

I thought for a moment that I saw Papa, but it wasn't him. I was so tired that I was imagining things. I wished he would come to say goodbye to me. I turned, expecting him to appear in one of the wide archways of the station, knowing that he would not appear. How could I not have known that he was the one who would save me? How could I have gone all these years without ever really seeing him? I wished that I

had tried harder to know him, that I had just once asked him, “Papa, how was your day?”

I wished that I go back, just to say goodbye, but it was too late. The train was here.

I sat back on my suitcase, looking at the train door but unwilling to move just yet. Instead, I watched and listened to this entire adult world as if I had never seen or heard it before—it was noisy and crowded and larger than I could imagine.